

How to become involved with the Animal Welfare and Ethical Review Body (AWERB) – report of a workshop held at the 2015 IAT Congress

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Introduction

Every establishment licensed under the Animals (Scientific Procedures) Act 1986 (ASPA) must set up and maintain an Animal Welfare and Ethical Review Body (AWERB), formerly known as an Ethical Review Process (ERP)*. The major tasks of the AWERB are taken from Directive 2010/63/EU** and include advising staff on matters related to the welfare of animals, in relation to their acquisition, accommodation, care and use; and advising on the application of the 3Rs (replacement, reduction and refinement), keeping staff informed of relevant technical and scientific developments. The Home Office Guidance to the ASPA¹ sets out several additional tasks for the AWERB in the UK, including:

- promoting awareness of animal welfare and Replacement, Reduction and Refinement (the 3Rs);
- providing a forum for discussion and development of ethical advice to the establishment licence holder on all matters related to animal welfare, care and use at their establishment;
- supporting named persons and other staff dealing with animals, on animal welfare, ethical issues and provision of appropriate training; and helping to promote a ‘culture of care’ within the establishment and, as appropriate, in the wider community.

Each AWERB has to include, as full members, at least

one Named Animal Care and Welfare Officer (NACWO) and one Named Veterinary Surgeon (NVS). AWERBs at user establishments must also have a scientific member. In addition, other named persons, including Named Information Officers (NIOs) and Named Training and Competency Officers (NTCOs) should be ‘actively engaged’ with the AWERB.

Animal technologists and care staff are ideally placed to help the AWERB fulfil the functions set out in the Directive as well as the additional tasks and this is reflected in the ASPA’s requirements above. However, membership of the AWERB is not just for named persons – animal technologists with a range of roles are able to make valuable contributions with respect to providing information about animal behaviour, biology and welfare needs, giving technical input, applying ‘local’ values to the AWERB’s discussions and judgements and broadening the range of perspectives that can be brought to bear. They can also assist ‘lay’ or independent members of the AWERB in fulfilling their roles, for example by helping lay members to understand the impact of procedures on animals and supporting them when they ask about issues such as humane endpoints, welfare assessment or non-technical summaries.²

A workshop was held at the 2015 IAT Congress, with the aim of encouraging animal technologists to become involved with the AWERB at their establishment or to contribute more actively if they were already members. The session comprised talks from a Home Office Animals in Science Regulation Unit (ASRU) Inspector and an animal technologist who was also an active AWERB member, with discussion sessions. This report summarises both the talks and discussions and sets out some recommendations for animal technologists, establishments and the IAT.

* ASPA Schedule 2C Part 1, paragraph 6 and Schedule 3 Part 2, paragraph 6.

** Directive 2010/63/EU regulates animal care and use throughout the European Union. It requires establishments to set up ‘Animal-welfare Bodies’, which are more limited in composition and function than the UK AWERB. However, the UK exercised its right to retain more extensive provisions when implementing the Directive.

Background: the delegates and their level of engagement with the AWERB

A Turning Point session was used to gather some information about the delegates and their level of awareness of and participation in, the AWERB. Thirty-two delegates attended the workshop; most (16) were from universities, followed by research institutes (10) and breeding establishments (4), with the remainder from a Contract Research Organisation (CRO) and a pharmaceutical establishment. Most people described themselves as primarily animal technologists or NACWOs, although several held additional roles including NTCO, NIO, Home Office Liaison Officer (HOLO) and NVS. Almost half the attendees (15) had worked at their facility for over 10 years and most of the others had been at the same establishment for 1 to 5 years. A third of the delegates attending the workshop already sat on their establishment’s AWERB. Of those who did not, most would like to – but there were several reasons why they were not currently members (Figure 1).

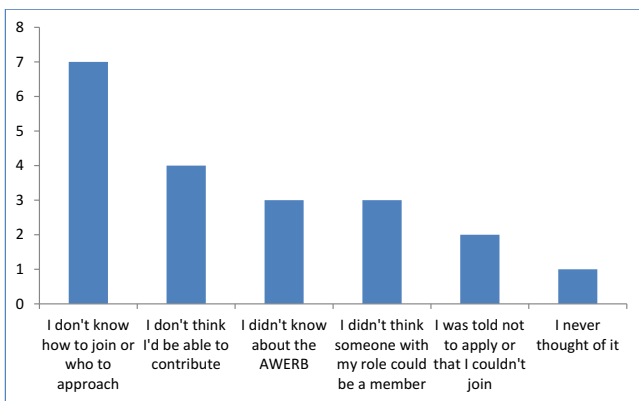


Figure 1. Reasons given by delegates for not being AWERB members

Although this was a very small sample, the reasons people gave for not sitting on their AWERBs indicate

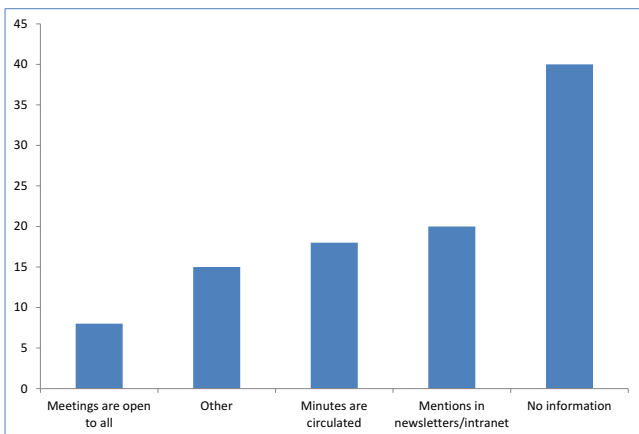


Figure 2. Information provided about the AWERB at delegate’s establishments

that some establishments have work to do with respect to raising the profile of the AWERB and ensuring that all staff know about its form and function and are actively encouraged to think about whether they could contribute. This was also suggested by the answers to a question about the information that is provided about the AWERB at delegates’ facilities (Figure 2).

Of the delegates who were already AWERB members, the majority felt confident about contributing to discussions, believed that their expertise and contributions added value to the AWERB and felt that their expertise and input were respected. There was a good level of awareness among all delegates about the tasks of the AWERB relating to advising on welfare and the 3Rs and to establishing and reviewing management and operational processes. However, delegates were less informed about other AWERB tasks including following the development and outcomes of projects, advising the Establishment Licence Holder (ELH) whether to support project proposals, supporting named persons and promoting the culture of care. Awareness about the AWERB’s role of advising on rehoming was lowest of all.

AWERB, ASRU and animal technologists – whose job is it anyway?

Home Office ASRU Inspector Anne-Marie Farmer discussed some important activities that have a significant impact upon the standards of both animal welfare and science at an establishment. These include advising on the acquisition, accommodation, care and use of animals, reviewing the establishment’s management and operational procedures, advising on the 3Rs in relation to project proposals and implementing humane endpoints. All of these are included within the AWERB (AWB) tasks listed in Article 27 of Directive 2010/63/EU and both ASRU and animal technologists can make valuable contributions, either in their own right or through the AWERB. In particular, they can raise awareness of the biology, behaviour and welfare needs of the study species and ensure that relevant in-house knowledge about operating procedures, available expertise and animal house management is brought to the table.

One of the UK AWERB’s important additional tasks is to advise the ELH whether to support a project licence application, giving primary consideration to local perspectives with respect to science, animal care and husbandry, veterinary matters, the 3Rs, statistics and experimental design and local policies.

Another AWERB task is to assist with the retrospective assessment of project licences, when these are requested by the Home Office. The AWERB is required to consider whether the programme of work was carried

out, whether the objectives and benefits were achieved, the actual harms to the animals and lessons learned with respect to the 3Rs. The AWERB is then required to produce a report for the licence holder to submit to the Home Office along with a revised Non-Technical Summary.

While the establishment licence holder bears ultimate responsibility for ensuring that the establishment complies with the ASPA and has developed and maintained an appropriate culture, the AWERB, animal technologists and named persons can all work collaboratively, with good communication with ASRU, to help this happen (Figure 3). Animal technologists can play an especially important part in providing and interpreting information on actual severity and refinement which helps to improve science, animal welfare and care and the application of the 3Rs at the establishment. Getting involved with your AWERB is a good way to ensure that your voice is heard in all of these areas and to make a difference.

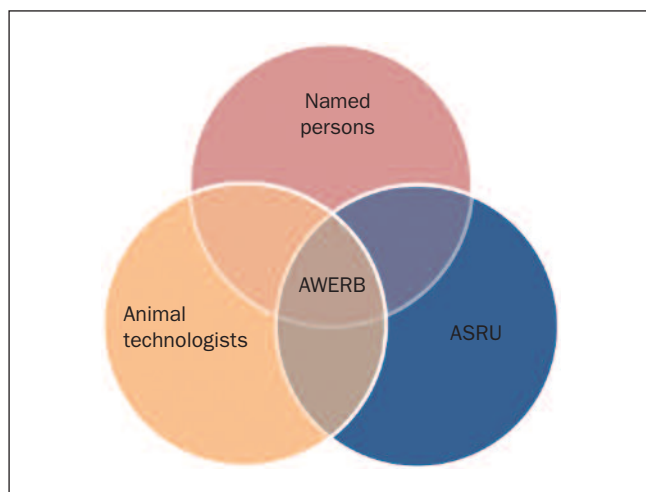


Figure 3. Working collaboratively to achieve the AWERB's tasks and promote animal welfare

An animal technologist's view

Stephen Woodley, a NACWO at University College London, gave a presentation on his experiences during seven years of involvement with AWERBs. In Stephen's view, animal technologists can play an important role in the AWERB because they are relatively impartial – although some are involved in the science and may co-author papers, in general animal technologists do not have the same level of direct 'interest' in getting a project approved as the researcher. As a result, their input tends to focus on the animal welfare and practical issues. The animal technologist's in-depth knowledge of the behaviour and welfare needs of different species and strains can also help to inform ways of preventing suffering and promoting a better informed harm-benefit assessment. AWERB tasks and activities to which animal technologists have positively contributed include:

- Promoting and improving training and development for licensees and other Biological Services Unit staff.
- Improving internal communications, e.g. by initiating booklets setting out the responsibilities of personal licensees, posters with information on techniques and seminars and cards providing guidance on reporting concerns.³
- Receiving information from the establishment's overarching NACWO forum.
- Improving accommodation and care.
- Reviewing humane killing, including justification for non-Schedule 1 techniques.
- Promoting tissue sharing.
- Ensuring that demand matches supply within breeding and sourcing programmes.
- Defining and implementing rehoming protocols.
- Inviting external speakers to address the AWERB on topics relevant to its tasks.

Two examples below provide some more detail to explain the role of the AWERB. First, in response to animal technologists' concerns that mice were singly housed (due to complexities with timed mating), the AWERB devised a plan to communicate the issues to researchers and find ways to increase pair-housing wherever possible. This has significantly reduced the number of singly housed animals and reduced staff workloads. The AWERB has also initiated a programme to ensure that all licensees are aware of minimum housing standards, including displaying information on stocking densities in every room.

Second, rehoming is an excellent way to show that we value animals and that their welfare is important, so wherever tissues are not required we do our utmost to rehome animals. The AWERB considers various aspects including authorisation from the Home Office, vetting prospective owners and preparing animals for their new lives and we have successfully rehomed rabbits and cats through the programme with practical input from animal technologists.

If you would like to become part of initiatives like these through the AWERB at your establishment, one way to begin is to discuss the possibility of sitting in on a meeting with your manager or the AWERB Chair. Attending and observing one or more meetings will give you a good idea of the kinds of discussion that take place and provide you with some insights as to the contributions you could make. It is also helpful to ask personal and project licence holders about their research, read minutes of previous meetings and look at project licences that have passed through your local AWERB and gone on to be granted by the Home Office.

Should you become a member of the AWERB or attend meetings, you will find that there will be times when people will disagree with your opinions. However, this is

all part of the process and, provided you have a good reason or some evidence to back up what you are saying, there is no harm in giving your views. Some people may be difficult to deal with, so use your experience, training and knowledge to justify what you are saying and win people around for improved animal welfare. The AWERB Chair should also support you when you express your views and make sure that you are satisfied with, or can accept, the outcome of the discussion.

Discussion session on project licence review

The second discussion session focused on the project licence application form and the ways in which animal technologists can have input into project review. Although this is only one of the AWERB's tasks, thoughtful review of licence applications can identify wider issues that are relevant to other tasks, also contributing to the culture of care. Animal technologists can provide an informed understanding of the impact of each step on each animal, including how adverse effects and their indicators can be identified, predicted and recognised. They are also likely to know whether the expertise is locally available to carry out the project and can bring in technical knowledge about both refinement and approaches to conducting procedures that other AWERB members may not possess.

Groups of delegates reviewed some protocol sheets from fictitious project licence applications, in the context of how they would help the AWERB to advise the establishment licence holder whether to support the projects. Many issues were identified including the number of times animals would experience dosing, sampling or imaging, humane endpoints and how welfare would be assessed, including indicators and frequency of monitoring.

Some delegates felt that they would like to have further information about the structure and content of the application form, including the reasons for different options within the protocol sheets, how to predict what would happen to each animal in cases where several options were presented and the definition of terms such as re-use. Part of the discussion session addressed the amount of specific information that would be expected on a project licence application form, as opposed to the more in-depth information that would be gained from talking about the project with the applicant. It was understood that the issues delegates identified need not lead to amendments to the licence application. It is nevertheless important to have those conversations and be satisfied that local values were being applied (e.g. with respect to blood sampling routes, biopsy sites or administration volumes).

Many delegates said that they would like to know more

about the science behind the procedures in which the animals they cared for (and sometimes conducted procedures upon) were used. For example, it would be easier to accept the use of non-Schedule 1 techniques such as perfusion fixation or exsanguination if the scientific justification was explained. Some attendees described how researchers at their establishments ensured that animal technologists and care staff were informed about the science, by giving presentations for animal unit staff and generally being accessible to them.

In a final discussion on training issues, delegates felt that the training they had received within Home Office modules and from the IAT, would enable them to participate in the AWERB. However, there was general agreement that in-house training, Continuing Professional Development (CPD) and awareness-raising would be beneficial with respect to the local AWERB, including its composition and function, how its tasks complement the work of ASRU and how it engages with other local bodies and user groups.

Action points:

Actions at establishment level, e.g. for implementation by Establishment Licence Holders or Named Persons:

1. Ensure that all staff are aware of the AWERB, including its composition and functions. Consider ways to raise its profile including opening meetings to all staff, circulating minutes, mentioning the AWERB in newsletters and producing posters.
2. Actively encourage staff to join and contribute to the AWERB.
3. Produce an induction pack for AWERB members, including information on all AWERB tasks. Background on the structure and purpose of the project licence application form would also be helpful, to clarify how much detail is expected and the kind of topics that can be identified for discussion by the AWERB.
4. Encourage, support and facilitate good communication between researchers and animal technologists and care staff, including seminars and discussions either within or separate from the AWERB.

For the IAT:

1. Raise awareness of the AWERB among animal technologists.
2. Encourage animal technologists to find out about the AWERBs at their establishments, with a view to becoming involved.
3. Provide training for animal technologists on how to communicate effectively at AWERBs and how they can contribute to the AWERB tasks.

For animal technologists:

1. Find out about the AWERB at your establishment – ask whether you can sit in on a meeting.

2. If there is resistance, remember that the Home Office expects Establishment Licence Holders to 'actively seek a wider membership' than the minimum required by ASPA (Home Office Guidance section 10.3) and enlist the support of a sympathetic senior member of staff.
3. If you are already a member of your AWERB, reflect on whether you participate and contribute as much as you would like to. If the answer is no, consider why – for example, do you feel you will not be supported or do you require training or further information about any particular aspects of AWERB tasks? Would it be possible to discuss this with the Chair or Named Persons?
4. Read through the new RSPCA resource book for lay members of ethical review bodies⁴ – this also includes plenty of useful information for 'non-lay' members. See also the recently revised RSPCA/LASA guiding principles on good practice for AWERBs (Figure 4).⁵



Figure 4. Resources with guidance on the AWERB and ethical review

References

(all URLs last viewed 1 July 2015)

- ¹ **Home Office.** (2014). *Guidance on the Operation of the Animals (Scientific Procedures) Act 1986*. Download at: <https://www.gov.uk/research-and-testing-using-animals>
- ² **Jennings, M.** (2010). Lay members and animal technologists – working together to enhance the ERP. *Animal Technology and Welfare*, 9(3), 139-142.
- ³ **Hawkins, P., Ryder, K., Mortell, N. and Patten, D.** (2014). Raising concerns about laboratory animal welfare: report of a workshop at IAT Congress 2014. *Animal Technology and Welfare*, 13(2), 81-85.
- ⁴ **Jennings, M. and Smith, J.** (2015). *A Resource Book for Lay Members of Ethical Review and Similar Bodies Worldwide*. Third edition. Download at: <http://tinyurl.com/p5fy862>
- ⁵ **RSPCA and LASA.** (2015). *Guiding Principles on Good Practice for Animal Welfare and Ethical Review Bodies. A report by the RSPCA Research Animals Department and LASA Education, Training and Ethics Section* (Jennings, M.). Download at: <http://www.lasa.co.uk/publications.html>