RSPCA
ANIMALS IN SCIENCE

Summary Report: Lay Members' Forum 2024

January 2025
Animals in Science Department

Introduction

The 31st Lay Members' Forum, organised by the RSPCA, brought together AWERB members from a diverse range of establishments to engage in a series of informative sessions and discussions. Topics covered included induction and training, addressing the 'R' of Replacement, and empathising with animals. The final session explored what AWERB members need to help enhance their effectiveness.

Report by Jessica Rodda and Maggy Jennnings

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Session 1: Induction and Training

Penny Hawkins presented the findings of a recent RSPCA survey (here) into induction and training for AWERB members. This revealed very different commitment to training between establishments. Some new AWERB members received no training, while others were offered formal events, one-on-one discussions, and various resources. Perceived knowledge gaps included experimental design, alternatives to animal use, project licence applications, and committee skills, particularly in handling disagreements. Training in committee skills was deemed important. Despite perceptions, AWERB members are not all expected to be experts in experimental design, alternatives or science, and proper training should clarify this. A dedicated 'module' for lay members was suggested. Penny also highlighted the recently revised RSPCA/LASA guidance for AWERB member induction.

An example induction template could be:

- **Have an introductory meeting with the AWERB Chair, or experienced member, to work through and discuss the self-assessment tables in the RSPCA/LASA Guidance on AWERB induction (1-1½ hours), then for participants to:**
- **Be assigned an AWERB 'buddy'**
- **Read The AWERB Dictionary**
- **Use Being an effective Lay member of AWERB infographic – much of this applies to all members**
- **Read your local AWERB Terms of Reference**
- **Take a tour of the animal unit and meet animal facility staff**
- **Attend the Local Module**
- **Follow up all of the above with discussion and feedback**

Ken Applebee from CLAST explained that this is a non-profit provider of Higher Education and Continuing Professional Development (CPD) qualifications, which partners with the Advance Training Centre at MRC Harwell. Courses are taught by expert industry professionals. While AWERB members don't need in-depth scientific expertise, they do need adequate understanding to ask informed questions, and Ken emphasised that many knowledge gaps could be addressed through CLAST courses. These include topics such as experimental design, the application of the Animals (Scientific Procedures) Act, and the application of the 3Rs to the severity assessment framework. Each course is worth 20 credits and can be taken individually, providing an opportunity for AWERB members to enhance their understanding in specific areas.

Discussion

There was a strong emphasis on the need to balance the importance of CPD and AWERB member workload, as many are volunteers. Overloading them with training requirements and too much information, or expecting the same level of CPD as a formal job-like role, could lead to burnout and the loss of members. This would be a shame as it is difficult to find independent lay members who can provide the perspective of someone outside animal use. Suggested solutions included providing more time for training, structuring AWERB processes to avoid making roles too burdensome and, in some cases, financially compensating members.

The need for a more structured and/or formalised approach to training was also identified, such as providing a six-month induction schedule, with regular check-ins to assess understanding and confidence. This could include current AWERB members explaining their roles to new members one-to-one, with regular visits to animal facilities to meet staff and understand the work. Members could also evaluate themselves against the RSPCA/LASA induction checklist to check whether they are properly equipped to contribute. Training in species-specific behaviours, and in understanding the responses of animals to procedures, was seen as essential to improving members' abilities to assess the welfare of animals in research.

It was suggested that CPD and induction be standing agenda items at AWERB meetings, ensuring that training processes are continuously reviewed and improved. To support this, resources like the RSPCA/LASA induction report and species-specific training materials could be shared, and members could be encouraged to attend relevant courses such as CLAST and the E1L module for personal licensees that covers legislation and ethics. Some participants discussed the opportunity to revisit induction processes, particularly with the arrival of new leadership at animal facilities. Such changes presented a good chance to review and update existing procedures.

Overall, the discussion underscored the importance of supporting AWERB members with adequate training - and the resources necessary to provide this - while ensuring that their roles remain manageable and fulfilling.

Session 2: Replacement

Dr Juliet Dukes from Replacing Animal Research (RAR, formerly FRAME) presented their new 'Replacement Checklist' to help improve the implementation of alternatives. The Replacement 'R' is often poorly addressed, e.g. due to being considered too late within project development, or insufficient knowledge and guidance on non-animal methods. Better tools are needed to help researchers demonstrate thorough exploration of alternatives and to guide reviewers (including the AWERB) in assessing compliance.

The Replacement Checklist tool addresses six key questions:

- **Where was information obtained;**
- **What subject areas were covered;**
- **How the search was conducted;**
- **Who was consulted;**
- **When the information was published; and**
- **Why search results were deemed unsuitable.**

The checklist is available here and Juliet encouraged attendees to trial it at their institutions and provide feedback.

Next, Penny Hawkins presented on an RSPCA project, led by Renelle McGlacken and Barney Reed, which explored barriers to adopting non-animal methods in research undertaken within universities. Despite technological advances and growing policy momentum toward phasing out animal use, change is hindered by entrenched practices and cultures in academia, where animal use is often viewed as the 'gold standard'.

The project identified 11 key themes, including: lack of funding; lack of appropriate skills; limited access to non-animal methods; and the established nature of animal models. To overcome the barriers that these present, researchers need knowledge of available non-animal methods, their advantages, limitations, and applications, alongside access to training, collaborations, and funding. Support is also needed to build confidence in non-animal methods, with help in troubleshooting, project costing, and publishing. Greater collaboration and understanding across research areas will be essential to drive progress. You can download a report of the project here and a summary infographic here - work is continuing on this topic, beginning with a follow-up stakeholder workshop in January 2025.

Discussion

This considered how AWERBs could better engage with scientists on replacement. The breadth of replacement, which spans diverse technologies such as cell cultures, machine learning, and organs-on-chips, can make it difficult to identify a starting point. Many saw the Replacement Checklist provided by RAR as a useful tool, particularly for lay members.

When discussing whether any AWERBs were particularly effective in advising on replacement, one participant said that their establishment's AWERB included an 'expert in non-animal methods'. However, it was then debated as to what qualifies someone as an 'expert' when the field of alternatives is so broad. Another establishment had created three sub-groups each dedicated to one of the 3Rs, allowing for more focused advice and input. This was considered a promising approach.

The discussion emphasised that AWERBs should foster a supportive environment where researchers feel empowered to act on replacement opportunities. Providing scientists with tools, guidance, and encouragement was seen as more effective than simply auditing their efforts. AWERBs also need to be aware of, and encourage researchers to develop, communication and collaboration with others in their establishment working in fields outside of animal research, whose methods could be applied to replacing animals in whole or part. Finally, participants highlighted the potential value of involving university librarians in AWERB processes. Librarians could offer essential skills in conducting literature searches on the wide range of methods encompassed by replacement. One attendee said that their establishment had already included a librarian on their AWERB, which was seen as a positive and practical step forward.

Session 3: Empathising with Animals

This session opened with a presentation from Charlotte Burn from the Royal Veterinary College. Empathy, the ability to understand and share others' feelings, is central to animal welfare because it helps us recognise and respond to animals' distress. As well as the clear ethical considerations, empathy can also improve scientific validity by reducing stress-related interference in research outcomes.

However, empathising with animals is not without challenges. People vary in how they perceive and express emotions, and their capacity for empathy is influenced by personal experiences and assumptions. Anthropomorphism, while sometimes misleading, can serve as a useful starting point, especially when informed by biological homology. Shared evolutionary ancestry means humans and animals, particularly mammals, have common emotional and physiological responses, such as expressions of pain as shown by the grimace scales developed for rodents and some other animals. Homology provides opportunities to refine practices and reduce harm. For instance, recognising shared taste preferences and learning abilities allows for less invasive methods of administering substances, such as voluntary consumption - taking a flavoured dose from a syringe - instead of forced oral gavage.

Critical anthropomorphism, which combines empathy with scientific evidence, offers the most accurate understanding of animals' experiences. For example, while humans might find darkness anxiety-inducing, rodents generally feel safer in the dark. Similarly, the aversion of mice to being lifted by the tail aligns with their natural instincts as burrowing prey animals. Even in less familiar species, like fish, evidence shows that procedures such as fin clipping cause pain, since this can be alleviated with appropriate pain killing interventions.

In summary, empathy is a valuable tool for ethical harm-benefit analysis and refining practices in animal research. While anthropomorphism is not inherently wrong, it becomes most effective when paired with evidence-based insights into the unique emotional and perceptual experiences of different species.

Discussion

The discussion session engaged participants in small group activities to explore the application of critical anthropomorphism to animal welfare in research, using case studies involving a mouse, a dog, and a zebrafish. You can download all the materials you need to run this session (and adapt it to suit your own establishment) here - why not give it a try?

Participants highlighted the importance of considering the cumulative effects of these experiences on animal welfare. They discussed how these effects could be assessed and used to define endpoints, emphasising the need to establish humane endpoints when animals have undergone numerous procedures that could result in significant suffering. The discussion also addressed welfare measurement, noting that body weight is often used as a basic indicator but may be insufficiently sensitive. Participants reflected on the severity of losing 10-20% of body weight, drawing parallels to the significant suffering this would cause in humans. The consensus was that more sensitive and comprehensive welfare measures should be prioritised to better understand and alleviate the negative experiences of animals in research.

To close this session, participants were asked ‘what will you do differently with respect to empathising with animals?’. Participants expressed a strong commitment to enhancing empathy for animals in research by fostering discussion and reflection. They emphasised the importance of imagining the animal’s perspective, considering cumulative experiences, and addressing both physical and emotional welfare, including elements like bright lights or unnatural environments. Many highlighted the importance of engaging others, through AWERB discussions, workshops, or informal conversations, to consider how animals might feel, often by drawing parallels to personal or pet experiences. Practical actions included learning more about species-specific behaviours, seeking input from animal technologists, and sharing best practices for enrichment. Participants also stressed the need to scrutinise interventions critically, ensuring techniques like positive reinforcement are effectively implemented, and to always challenge assumptions about animals’ feelings and experiences.

Session 4: What AWERB Members Need

Marine Barnabé presented highlights from a report created after a workshop at the 2023 Lay Members Forum which focussed on the needs of AWERB members. Workshop members responded to questions about what the ideal AWERB would be like, what members need to achieve this, and the support required for them to be effective in their role. The report used inductive thematic analysis to identify key themes related to the ideal AWERB and the needs of its members.

Results:
The ideal AWERB should be a safe, open, and welcoming space with informal meetings that encourage rapport-building among members. It should include accessible information, a diverse membership, and representation from all areas of the licensed establishment. AWERB members should feel empowered to participate in discussions, with a round-table format ensuring equal input from everyone. They need recognition, such as positive feedback, for their contributions, as well as compensation for their time, with some suggesting paid roles for members. There is also a need for better training and support, leading to improved competence and confidence. A final suggestion was that it would be useful to compare the role and processes of NHS medical research ethics committees (RECs) with those of AWERBs to see if there are any REC procedures that could be adopted by AWERBs to improve performance and effectiveness.

Action points for AWERBs include:

- **streamlining processes to address time constraints;**
- **promoting a positive and inclusive meeting experience;**
- **provision of continuous training and development opportunities;**
- **actively valuing members by listening to and implementing their suggestions;**
- **fostering transparency; and**
- **engaging with the institution's Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) team.**

RSPCA AWERB Resources

Our key guidance documents are available online:

- RSPCA/LASA Guiding Principles on Good Practice for AWERBs
- RSPCA Lay Members' Resource Book
- RSPCA/LASA Developing Induction Materials for AWERB members

We currently offer online and in-person workshops for AWERB members and those involved in the care, use and regulation of animals in science. Some examples include:

- Developing a good Culture of Care (2 hour - half day)
- Maximising the effectiveness of your AWERB: advising on ethics, project licence applications, training for AWERB members, and AWERB self-assessment (full day)

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