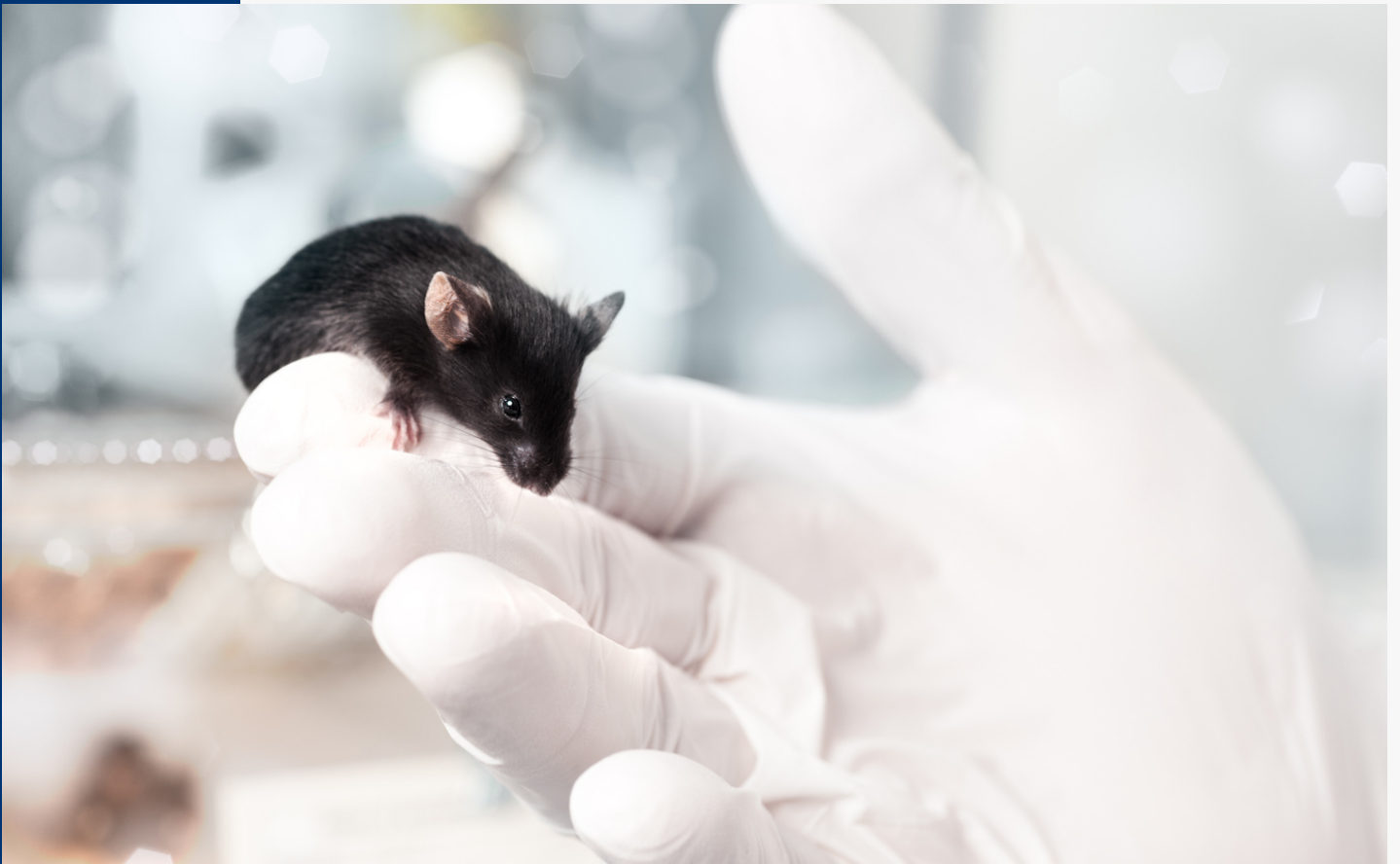




December 2023

RSPCA Lay Members' Forum



Marine Barnabé, Animals in Science Department



Animals in Science Department

The RSPCA is the world's oldest and largest animal welfare charity, promoting the welfare of animals in the home, on farms, in the wild, and in research settings. The Animals in Science department is widely respected within the scientific community. We use a constructive and informed approach to ensure that animal use is ethically and scientifically challenged, promote the 3Rs to reduce animal use and suffering and improve welfare, raise standards of regulation and animal welfare internationally, and promote open and informed debate on the use of animals in science.



The RSPCA and AWERBs

The RSPCA was instrumental in the introduction of the local Ethical Review Process, the forerunner to today's Animal Welfare and Ethical Review body (AWERB) in the UK. We champion the AWERB, and similar committees, as vital adjuncts to regulators, significantly reducing the impact of science on animals, and improving animal welfare, scientific quality, and public accountability.

The RSPCA Animals in Science team is closely involved with AWERBs in:

- providing information and advice to a wide range of stakeholders;
- producing peer-reviewed papers, guidelines, and other resources designed to develop and facilitate the work of AWERBs and other bodies engaged in ethical review;
- organising AWERB-related conferences and delivering presentations at scientific conferences in the UK and worldwide;
- sitting as independent members on a number of AWERBs across the UK.

Our position

The RSPCA's primary aim is the replacement of animal experiments with humane alternatives worldwide. Until this can be achieved, our work helps to ensure that the minimum number of animals are used, they experience the minimum suffering, and their welfare is significantly improved.





Useful resources

The following guidelines and resources have been developed specifically to support AWERBs in fulfilling their tasks.

Guiding Principles on Good Practice for Animal Welfare and Ethical Review Bodies

This resource, produced jointly with the Laboratory Animal Science Association (LASA), provides a brief, clear overview of common AWERB tasks and good practice for meeting these. It is widely used in the UK and overseas.

Lay Members' Resource Book

This document provides guidance on how to participate effectively in the AWERB, including making ethical judgements. Although the title refers to lay members, it is a useful resource for any AWERB member.

The AWERB as a forum for discussion

This document provides guidance, ideas, and examples to help AWERBs fulfil their function as a forum for discussion.

Lay Members' Forum 2023

On 5 December, the RSPCA Animals in Science team welcomed 65 participants to the annual Lay Members' Forum, an event which was first held in 1999. This year's meeting comprised three sessions dedicated to topics that were identified as important to lay members through previous surveys. The day included both presentation and discussion sessions, interspersed with breaks to enable participants to network.



Session 1: Reviewing the use of animals outside of the scope of the Animals (Scientific Procedures) Act 1986 (ASPA)

An introduction by the Head of the Animals in Science department Dr Penny Hawkins was followed by the first speaker Prof. Lars Chittka (Queen Mary University of London), who presented some of his research on sentience in bees. Lars and his team study the sensory systems and behaviour of various bee species to understand the sensory systems of animals and how these senses are used in their natural environments.

This research has raised important questions regarding insect sentience, and exploring whether insects might experience subjective states and emotions. The implications of insect intelligence and sentience for their welfare cannot be understated. Insects are used extensively in various industries, including agriculture and the insect feed-and-food sector, where their wellbeing is often not acknowledged or taken into account. It is important to note

that the use of insects (and other invertebrates, apart from cephalopods such as octopuses) is not currently regulated by the ASPA, [a welfare issue that is gaining increasing interest](#) from scientists and ethicists. By recognising the cognitive and emotional lives of insects, Lars believes that we can develop more humane practices that consider their needs and reduce unnecessary suffering. Promoting awareness about insect welfare and implementing guidelines for their ethical treatment in various industries can lead to a more compassionate and sustainable relationship between humans and these often-overlooked beings.

The second speaker was Jonathan Thornton, who works as an insectary technician at the University of Liverpool and is completing a PhD focused on the portrayal of insects in speculative fiction. Jonathan shared his invaluable, and at times poignant, insights into caring for insects such as tsetse flies and mosquitoes, which are often reared solely for the purpose of developing more efficient ways of killing them. Acknowledging these animals as more than simply vectors of human disease, Jonathan described the moral and ethical dilemmas he has experienced in this sometimes difficult work. This is often referred to as 'compassion fatigue' and can affect people with a variety of different roles. The North American 3Rs Collaborative (NA3RsC) has created a useful [online hub](#) to help address this issue. The voice of those caring for animals in research and testing is sometimes overlooked and we felt that this presentation was one of the most powerful of this Lay Members' Forum.

Next, we heard from [Dr Juliet Dukes](#) and [Celean Camp](#), both from the Fund for the Replacement of Animals in Medical Experiments ([FRAME](#)). Increasing evidence of sentience in invertebrate animals previously considered as potential 'partial replacements', and the recognised ethical, welfare, and scientific concerns about animal-derived reagents (such as fetal bovine serum used in cell culture), have made FRAME reflect on the organisation's position and funding strategy. Juliet and Celean shared some of these reflections, and explored how and whether AWERBs could, or should, have oversight of animal use that falls outside the scope of ASPA.

The fourth presentation in this session was [Prof. Nicola Menzies-Gow](#) from the Royal Veterinary College (RVC). As Professor of Equine Medicine, Nicola divides her time between clinical work, research, and teaching. She is also Chair of the RVC Clinical Research Ethical Review Board, a committee that is separate from the AWERB and which reviews all animal research that does not fall under the ASPA. Nicola spoke of the three main principles of non-maleficence (the absence of harm to animals), beneficence (the animal should benefit from the study in some way), and voluntary participation (informed consent from the owner of the animal), which underpin clinical research undertaken on privately owned animals such as pets. These non-ASPA studies require ethical review to ensure that the study design is robust, that there has been adequate consideration of the harm-benefit analysis, that the data generated will be appropriately

handled, and that the owner is providing informed consent for participation by their animal. Therefore, Nicola highlighted, the review process should be no less robust for clinical research studies performed under the Veterinary Surgeons Act than for research studies performed under the ASPA. In addition, ethical consideration for the use of residue samples, such as leftover blood collected for diagnostic purposes, and post-mortem tissues was also discussed.

The day's first session was brought to a close by a presentation from Dr Jennifer Ritchie, Senior Lecturer in Microbial Pathogenesis and Chair of the AWERB at the University of Surrey. Jennifer shared the University of Surrey's broad approach to the ethical review of the use of animals in research and teaching, including the processes developed at this establishment, and reflected on the challenges and opportunities presented.

Session 2: Retrospective review

The second session was focused on the retrospective review of project licences, which is an AWERB task that is distinct from the legal requirement for retrospective assessment for project licences involving 'severe' suffering or using dogs, cats, equids, or non-human primates. Dr Hugh Simmons, Animal Science Veterinary Lead at the Animal and Plant Health Agency (APHA), and Dr Emma Stringer, Director of the Biomedical Services Unit at the



University of Birmingham, shared their experiences and insights into best practice and provided examples of the processes used at their own establishments. The importance of identifying and disseminating 3R-relevant outputs from completed projects was highlighted. This includes sharing positive outcomes at conferences or through publications, but also ensuring that negative results are shared where possible to avoid duplication of studies. These presentations were followed by a group discussion on the role of the AWERB and its lay members in fulfilling this task effectively. Lay members shared their practices and reflected on how these could be improved and what role they may have in this process.

Session 3: Committee skills

In the third and final session, we focused on the AWERB as a committee in which members may benefit from having certain 'soft skills' in order to contribute effectively and have their voices heard. This session began with a presentation from [Kathleen Salter](#), PhD candidate at the University of Nottingham, whose research explores the concept of 'social legitimacy' in the institutional ethical review of animal research by the AWERB. Kathleen shared some of the findings of her study, which aims to better understand the relationship between ethics, different 'publics', and laboratory animal science. This project comprised focus group sessions with the lay public, alongside in-depth document analyses of key policy and guidance advising the UK AWERB. Kathleen discussed how focus group participants felt themselves to be engaged political citizens, as well as consumers of animal research outputs, such as new medicines and scientific knowledge. The implications of this were explored, including how transparent and open to societal influence the ethical review process should be and the expected role of the lay member.

The final speaker of the day was Dr Bentley Crudgington, an independent creative facilitator, producer, and artist with a particular interest in the ethics of participation, interdisciplinarity, welfare, and care. Bentley facilitated a workshop focusing on developing committee skills, introducing techniques and additional resources that may be used by lay members to deepen ethical discussions in their own AWERB and constructively raise difficult issues. A general discussion then opened up conversations about what other committee skills, and approaches, were needed by forum members. Finally, Bentley facilitated an individual exercise in which participants were asked to reflect on three questions relating to (1) what they felt their AWERB needed to function at its best, (2) what skills and behaviours they, as lay members, needed to display to contribute to the AWERB in the best way, and (3) what support they needed to achieve these behaviours. The participants' anonymous responses were collected and key themes within these will be shared in an upcoming report - watch this space!



Conclusions and action points

Through the discussion sessions, we identified the following recurrent themes:

- Feedback from participants confirmed that the review of **non-ASPA research** was an important and timely topic, which many attendees were glad to see addressed in this meeting. This is an area we will continue to work on, particularly with regard to good practice for reviewing all animal use within establishments.
- The importance of hearing from **animal technologists** and those directly working with and caring for the animals in an establishment was another key message. A large proportion of participants noted that they would want to hear more from animal technologists at future events – this is valuable feedback that we will take on board when planning our next event.
- Lay members mentioned the value of **visiting the animal unit regularly**. This is something to be encouraged as it is essential for AWERB members to have a good understanding of the animals and their housing and husbandry, as well as to meet staff members and find out about the establishment's Culture of Care. The RSPCA has produced an [information sheet on visiting the animal unit](#) with some guidance on what to expect and look for.
- Participants highlighted the importance of **good governance** at AWERB meetings and the difference that an excellent chairperson and secretary can make to the effective functioning of an AWERB. Having good chairing skills means allowing and encouraging everyone in the AWERB to participate equally and handling conflict constructively. Good governance also includes practicalities like ensuring all papers are sent out to committee members with enough time for review, minimising any technical issues with online meetings, and keeping meetings focused and on time.



Keep in touch

Over the next few months, we will be conducting a survey of AWERB members to identify topics of interest on which to focus our upcoming workshops and produce new resources. We really value your input and thoughts as all our work in this area is guided by what AWERB members tell us they need. We will be sharing a survey link via the AWERB Hub network and other media channels in the first few weeks of January 2024. If you have any suggestions, comments, or questions at any other time, please feel free to get in touch with animalsinscience@rspca.org.uk. We'd also like to increase our face-to-face outreach to AWERBs, so please let us know if you would like to host a collaborative workshop at your establishment in 2024.

 [RSPCA Animals in Science website](#)

 animalsinscience@rspca.org.uk

 [Animals in Science on LinkedIn](#)

 [Animals in Science on Twitter/X](#)

