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# Report from the 2024 Oxford AWERB hub meeting



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# Introduction

## The RSPCA Animals in Science department

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 have continually supported AWERBs and their members by organising training events for AWERB members, producing guidelines and other resources designed to develop and facilitate the work of AWERBs, and sitting as independent members on a number of AWERBs across the UK.

## Maximising the effectiveness of your AWERB

On 21 June 2024, the RSPCA Animals in Science department organised a hybrid meeting entitled 'Maximising the effectiveness of your AWERB'. This full-day event was organised in collaboration with and held at the University of Oxford. Over 120 participants joined from across the UK both in person and online, representing 48 institutions in total.

## Topics and format

There were four sessions focusing on (i) ethics, (ii) the AWERB task of advising on Project Licence applications, (iii) induction and training for AWERB members, and (iv) self-assessment for AWERBs. These topics were selected according to suggestions we've previously received from AWERB members. Each session comprised two short presentations followed by discussions in smaller groups and ended with plenary feedback. Participants suggested action points to implement at their own AWERBs at the end of each session and these were recorded using Slido. The agenda is shown on page 2.



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# Maximising the effectiveness of your AWERB

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10:00 **Welcome and Introduction** - James Bussell, University of Oxford

## Session 1: 'E' is for Ethics

**Aims:** to recognise that ethical review goes beyond the 3Rs and harm-benefit analysis; to review whether and how the AWERB currently 'does ethics'; and to identify any necessary action points

10:05 **What does 'ethics' mean to you?** Open discussion

10:15 **'Doing ethics'** - Penny Hawkins, RSPCA

10:25 **Discussion, feedback, and action points**

11:00 **Coffee break**

## Session 2: Advising on Project Licence applications

**Aim:** to help the AWERB advise on project licence applications more effectively, especially when there are large numbers of licences; with a focus on advising on each of the 3Rs

11:20 **The AWERB task of Project Licence review: what is expected?**  
Chloe Stevens, RSPCA

11:30 **Reducing time pressures when reviewing large numbers of licences**  
James Bussell, University of Oxford

11:40 **Discussion, feedback, and action points**

12:15 **Lunch break**

## Session 3: Training for AWERB members

**Aim:** to help the AWERB deliver effective programmes of training for new (induction) and current (ongoing/refresher) members of all roles

13:00 **AWERB training and induction survey results** - Marine Barnabé, RSPCA

13:10 **Training for AWERB members, with examples** - Lucy Whitfield, OWL Vets

13:25 **Discussion, feedback, and action points**

14:05 **Comfort break**

## Session 4: Self-assessment - how well is your AWERB doing?

**Aim:** to help AWERBs reflect on how well they are carrying out all their tasks, and to identify opportunities for improvement

14:20 **The importance of self-assessment** - Sally Robinson, CRUK Manchester

14:30 **3Rs self-assessment tools: the role of the AWERB** - Jessica Eddy, NC3Rs

14:45 **Discussion, feedback, and action points**

15:30 **Close**

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# Session 1: E is for Ethics

## What is ethics?

The first session of the day focused on ethical review as an important aspect of the AWERB. We started proceedings by asking participants to respond to the question ‘What does ‘ethics’ mean to you?’. The word cloud below summarises these responses. The phrase ‘**Doing the right thing**’ was the most common response, followed by the words ‘**morals**’ and ‘**compassion**’.



## Doing ethics

This icebreaker was followed by a presentation delivered by Dr Penny Hawkins (RSPCA) focusing on doing ethics at the AWERB. Penny set out some of the reasons why it is so important to include ethical discussions at AWERB meetings. She also explained that there is more to ‘doing ethics’ than implementing the 3Rs and conducting harm-benefit analyses - it should also include ‘**what, all things considered, is the right thing to do**’. Some potential societal concerns that need particular attention were described, including interfering with an animal’s brain or special sense organs, and violating an animal’s ‘integrity’ or naturalness. The final take-home messages for AWERB members were to **promote and normalise ethical discussions at the AWERB** and to ask the committee to reflect on how well it ‘does ethics’ using resources such as the RSPCA guides ‘[E is for Ethics](#)’ and ‘[The AWERB as a forum for discussion](#)’.

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## Discussion and action points

Next, participants were split into groups of 10-20 for discussions centered around ethical review. The following two questions were used as prompts:

- How does (or could) the AWERB identify, discuss, and address ethical issues and societal concerns, both within and outside project application review?
- How would you improve discussions, processes, and outcomes?

After some thought-provoking discussions, participants regrouped for some plenary feedback.

To identify action points, participants were asked to respond anonymously to the following question using Slido: 'What one action could you take to improve the way your AWERB does ethics?' Some useful responses and suggestions are collated here:

### What one action could you take to improve the way your AWERB does ethics?

Appoint an local ethics champion or guide

Define very clearly what are the practical ethics frameworks that can be used in evaluating a Project Licence application

Talk about research that is not currently being reviewed to initiate a discussion without decision dependency

Involve the senior management team in ethical discussions

Incorporate Bateson's cube in AWERB presentations

Have ethics guidance, lectures, and tutorials

Listen to all views and have a broad membership

Set up a process to raise ethical concerns and follow up on these

Have dedicated time for ethical discussions

Organise a speaker to present to the AWERB and to PPL/PIL/animal techs

Ask scientists to present their ethical discussions at the AWERB

Have early sight of projects in development and focus on ethics prior to writing and reviewing the PPL

Suggest case studies and have away-days or workshops specifically to talk about ethics

You may wish to suggest some these action points to your AWERB. If you want to let us know about any other actions your AWERB has successfully implemented, please do get in touch!

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# Session 2: Advising on Project Licence applications

## The AWERB task of Project Licence review: what is expected?

Dr Chloe Stevens (RSPCA) started this session by highlighting that, although it is listed as one of the AWERB's 'additional' tasks in the Home Office guidance, Project Licence review is a major part of the work of most AWERBs. The most relevant task is to 'advise the establishment licence holder whether to support project proposals, primarily considering such proposals from a local perspective and bringing local knowledge and local expertise to bear'. However, Project Licence review can also be considered in the context of (partially) fulfilling a number of other tasks, including advising staff on matters related to the welfare of animals, supporting Named Persons, promoting awareness of and advising on the application of the 3Rs, and not least providing a forum for discussion and the development of ethical advice. Chloe emphasised the role of providing a **local perspective**, as two different AWERBs at different establishments could consider the same Project Licence application and come to different conclusions on aspects such as policies, standards and values at the establishment, expertise present, or facilities and resources available.

Indeed, this is where the AWERB can really add value to aspects of the licence that may have had input from others bodies such as funding organisations. This task therefore benefits several parties. With regard to the **establishment**, the AWERB ensures that **local knowledge, expertise, and perspectives** are brought to bear on the project. For the **establishment licence holder**, AWERB review **provides independent advice with regard to animal work** carried out at the establishment, which is ultimately his or her personal legal responsibility, provides assurance that licence applications submitted to the Home Office are well prepared, and contributes significantly to the Culture of Care. Finally, for the **applicant**, thorough review by the AWERB can help the prospective Project Licence holder to **produce well-structured and considered Project Licence applications** for submission to the Home Office, demonstrating the **establishment's confidence in and support** for the project, and ensuring appropriate backing from the establishment and its staff.

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## Addressing Project Licence review

Interpreting the task of reviewing project proposals is largely up to the individual establishment. There are several possible objectives that the AWERB may wish to prioritise when considering the Project Licence application. This can be achieved through scrutiny by the AWERB itself, but it is also possible for these to be addressed by other experts (for example, a statistician), as long as the AWERB members are reassured that these issues have been covered and they have had the chance to raise any relevant concerns. One objective may be **assessing whether the licence has been prepared to a good standard that is consistent with the local requirements** - for example, does the application contain:

- Clear and achievable objectives (with a clear project plan that explains the experimental design and how the objectives will be addressed)
- Realistic appraisal of what can be achieved within the time-frame
- Appropriate scientific justification
- Details regarding funding, facilities, and equipment
- A clear and transparent non-technical summary.

Another key objective could be to **consider whether all of the relevant ethical and animal welfare issues have been identified and the harm-benefit analysis considered**. This includes:

- Identifying all harms to the animals and considering lifetime experiences
- Considering and appraising benefits in a realistic manner
- Considering and implementing the 3Rs
- Identifying wider ethical and societal concerns
- Balancing harms and benefits appropriately.

## Summary

Chloe wrapped up this presentation by summarising the following advice relating to the task of Project Licence review:

- Decide **what the AWERB would like to achieve** from the review and what the **outputs** should be
- Be clear about the **level of involvement** of the AWERB in Licence preparation
- Ensure that **local** perspectives, knowledge, and expertise have been considered
- Ensure that the **3Rs** are fully and appropriately implemented
- Ensure that **everyone has the opportunity to raise and discuss concerns** and is comfortable with the balance of benefits versus harms.



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### Discussion and action points

After a presentation by James Bussell on the University of Oxford's AWERB structure and review processes, participants rejoined their discussion groups to consider the following two questions:

- How can AWERBs manage requirements to review large numbers of projects effectively, and without compromising other tasks?
- What would an ideal (and adequately resourced) AWERB do to promote Replacement, Reduction (as in optimising animal numbers and improving experimental design), and Refinement?

A plenary discussion with feedback from each discussion group finished the morning's sessions and the meeting was adjourned for lunch.

## Session 3: Training for AWERB members

### RSPCA survey on induction and training for AWERB members

In this session, Dr Marine Barnabé (RSPCA) presented the results from a survey conducted in early 2024, aiming to gain a greater understanding of AWERB members' current induction practices and perceived training needs. Results from this survey highlighted the **lack of standardised practices with regard to induction, onboarding, and training of AWERB members** in different licensed establishments. The experiences described by respondents when joining an AWERB varied greatly, with some receiving no induction/training, and others having access to a mix of formal training events/courses, one-on-one discussions, and being provided various resources. Very few members had received training specific to AWERB membership. Overall, most new members:

- Were personally introduced to key persons on the AWERB
- Had a tour of the facility
- Completed the Home Office E1 and L module
- Received the RSPCA/LASA Guiding Principles on Good Practice for AWERBs document.

A large number of AWERB members felt they had knowledge gaps in certain areas. We have often observed a **disconnect between the expertise individual AWERB members believe they should have, and what should actually be expected of them in practice**. A large number of participants felt they were not sufficiently expert in the following areas:

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- Experimental design and statistics
  - Replacements and alternatives to animal use
  - The 'science' in Project Licence Applications
  - Committee skills

Expertise in committee skills is very important, and training should be available, but **AWERB members are not all expected to have specific, expert knowledge** about experimental design, Replacement, or the science in applications. Effective induction and training ought to make this clear, and explain how the AWERB functions as a body to ensure that all expertise is available within the group. A full report of this survey containing more in-depth analysis is available [here](#).

### Continuing training for AWERB members

Next, Dr Lucy Whitfield (OWL Vets) continued the theme of training and started by drawing parallels between the AWERB and a board of directors in combining technical expertise, industry knowledge, and behavioural competencies. The importance of training in developing **skills** (for optimal committee function) rather than roles was also highlighted. To develop a training plan that will produce an effective AWERB, Lucy gave the following advice:

- Develop an **orientation** process for all new members
- Give all AWERB members, including those in statutory roles, **access to training** and dedicate sufficient resources to training
- **Be flexible and creative in training delivery**, while recognising that AWERB members may be time-poor
- Set annual training goals and gather regular feedback
- **Recognise and acknowledge the important role played by the AWERB** in the establishment. 'Recognition' was also identified as an important theme for AWERB members in a recent [thematic analysis](#) conducted by the RSPCA Animals in Science team.

Lucy mentioned that the AWERB operates in a VUCA (Volatile, Unpredictable, Complex, and Ambiguous) environment and thus requires a diverse membership and highly trained individuals. She concluded this presentation with this thought for AWERBs: **'Your best resource is your people - make them the best that they can be.'**

### Discussion and action points

The discussion prompts for this group discussion session were:

- Did you receive an induction/training when you joined the AWERB?
  - What did it entail?
  - Did it prepare you for your role on the AWERB?

- Does your AWERB have a programme of ongoing CPD on issues such as ethics, 3Rs, the law, culture of care, good scientist-AWERB communications?
- Which areas related to carrying out AWERB tasks do you feel you would benefit from more training in/knowledge about?

Finally, action points in response to the question 'How could you better support new AWERB members?' were collected using Slido and some helpful suggestions are shown here:

## How could you better support new AWERB members?

Everyone on AWERB introduces themselves and recalls how they found their first AWERB and how they feel now, to validate and normalise nerves, hesitancy, confidence, and reinforce that expertise comes with time

Have a budget for training

Provide mentoring and external training

Have debrief sessions after meetings

Introduce an AWERB buddy system

Formal training before membership starts

Training specific to the members needs and yearly refresher training

Standardised AWERB member induction

Induction training, assign an expert member as advisor, suggest courses for continuous training, information on the law, standardised checklist for evaluating a project

Have an induction workshop for new members

CPD training on ethics and legislation

Spend some time explaining the function of the AWERB and meetings

Intro to, and training in, the 3Rs

Provide a list of acronyms to new members

Have a national resource for AWERB training

Create an induction/training pack for new members

Organise tours of the animal facilities

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# Session 4: Self-assessment

## Self-assessment: how well is your AWERB doing?

To start off the final session of the day, Dr Sally Robinson (Cancer Research UK/University of Bristol) spoke about the importance of self-assessment for AWERBs. Although it is not a specific AWERB task, **self-assessment is crucial to ensure continuous improvement of the committee's function** and to objectively assess whether the AWERB is achieving effective outcomes relating to its tasks, particularly with regard to implementation of the 3Rs, Culture of Care, and scientific quality. In addition, self-assessment can help identify and address potential issues such as:

- Gaps in membership and competencies
- Training needs
- Inadequate resources and support
- Ineffective working processes
- Certain AWERB tasks not being fulfilled effectively.

Sally recognised that **challenges** faced by AWERBs sometimes made performing self-assessments difficult. These include **time**, as meetings usually have a full agenda, **resources**, including the lack of budgets dedicated to this, and **communication**, as there is a certain lack of awareness of the AWERB and its role in many establishments. However, **performing regular self-assessments has many benefits**, such as the opportunity to **widen participation** in the AWERB, identifying **areas where real improvements can be made**, providing evidence that can be used to **support budget requests**, and the opportunity to use outputs to **set the committee's annual priorities and goals**. Finally, self-assessment also allows AWERBs to **recognise and celebrate areas** in which they are particularly **successful** and tasks that are achieved well. It is interesting to note that the theme of 'self-reflection and continuous improvement' was also identified as a key aspect of 'the ideal AWERB' in our previous [thematic analysis](#).

## 3Rs self-assessment tools: the role of the AWERB

In the final session of the day, Dr Jessica Eddy (NC3Rs) gave an overview of the **NC3Rs self-assessment tools** that may be useful for AWERBs wanting to **track, evaluate, and benchmark their institutional 3Rs activities**. Jess's presentation addressed why AWERBs should be encouraging the use of these tools, how AWERBs might go about completing an institutional assessment, and how to action the feedback.

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The NC3Rs has developed two online, free-to-use tools that provide a framework for assessing 3Rs activities and progress. The first of these is the **Research Group tool**, which is aimed at **research groups who use animals**. This could be any grouping of researchers, and does not need to be a traditional academic research group, but could be applied to thematic research areas for example. It includes ten overarching questions that are divided into four thematic areas: (i) engaging with the 3Rs, (ii) developing and implementing 3Rs initiatives, (iii) reviewing and improving research involving animals, and (iv) training in the 3Rs. The second tool is the **Research Institution Tool** and this is aimed at **universities and other academic or research-intensive organisations**. This questionnaire includes 38 overarching questions which reflect the breadth of 3Rs activities and opportunities that are available at the establishment. These are the six thematic areas covered by the Research Institution tool: (i) leadership, (ii) people, (iii) research and infrastructure, (iv) experimental design and reporting, (v) training, and (vi) publications and wider dissemination. After submission of either tool questionnaire, the system provides bespoke feedback including a spider diagram showing a score for each thematic area. This allows users to easily see how their group or institution is scoring in different areas and to track progress over time when the assessment is repeated.

Jess highlighted the importance of these self-assessment tools and the **role that the AWERB can play in encouraging their use and uptake at the licensed establishment**. For individual research groups, this forms a snapshot of the group's commitment to the 3Rs. The AWERB may therefore consider asking Project Licence holders to complete a group assessment as part of the Project Licence review process, as it captures information not otherwise reported. With regard to the wider establishment commitment to implementation of the 3Rs, an institutional self-assessment could help to benchmark how the institution is doing and determine priority areas for improvement, which can form the starting point to develop a 3Rs strategy and action plan. The NC3Rs has published a guidance document outlining how institutions can develop and implement such strategies.



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## Discussion and action points

The discussion prompts for this group discussion session were:

- Which tasks are AWERBs performing well, and which are afforded less priority?
- What changes could be made, to help ensure all tasks are fulfilled?
- What self-assessment processes do AWERBs have in place?

The following action points were suggested in response to the question: 'What could you do to improve self-assessment at your establishment?'

### What could you do to improve self-assessment at your establishment?

Set annual objectives for the AWERB and review these

Assign the task of 'self-assessment' to an AWERB member

Discuss self-assessments with members of other AWERBs

Perform an annual, full self-assessment, encompassing all aspects and not just the 'easy' tasks

Carve out time to develop an action plan and allocate responsibilities for each action

Perform a gap analysis and set SMART goals

Use the NC3Rs self-assessment tools and report results to senior management outside of the AWERB

## Keep in touch

If you have any suggestions, comments, or questions, or you would like to receive the presentations from this event, please feel free to get in touch with us at [animalsinscience@rspca.org.uk](mailto: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.



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# Resources

## General resources for AWERBs

- The **RSPCA/LASA Guiding Principles on Good Practice for AWERBs** provides a brief, clear overview of all the tasks of the AWERB and good practice for meeting these.
- The **RSPCA Lay Members' Resource Book**: what you need to know about your AWERB and how to participate effectively, including making ethical judgements.
- The **RSPCA AWERB Directory** webpages pool various resources on different topics of interest for AWERB members.
- The **European Commission working document on Animal Welfare Bodies and National Committees** to fulfil the requirements under the Directive is also helpful.

## Ethics and ethical review

- **The AWERB as a 'forum for discussion'** focuses on this task, setting out current practice, suggestions for progressing this and action points.
- **RSPCA/LASA Guiding Principles to Help Deliver the Ethics Learning Outcomes of Module 2 for Personal Licensees** has helpful ideas for training activities.
- The **RSPCA ethical review webpages** provide a wider discussion of ethical review as a process.

## Induction and training

- **The RSPCA/LASA Induction for AWERB members** book includes examples of induction activities and a self-assessment checklist for members.

## Self-assessment

- The **NC3Rs self-assessment tools** and guidance on **Developing and implementing an institutional 3Rs strategy**.



