What AWeRB members need

Reflections from the 2023 RSPCA Lay Members' Forum

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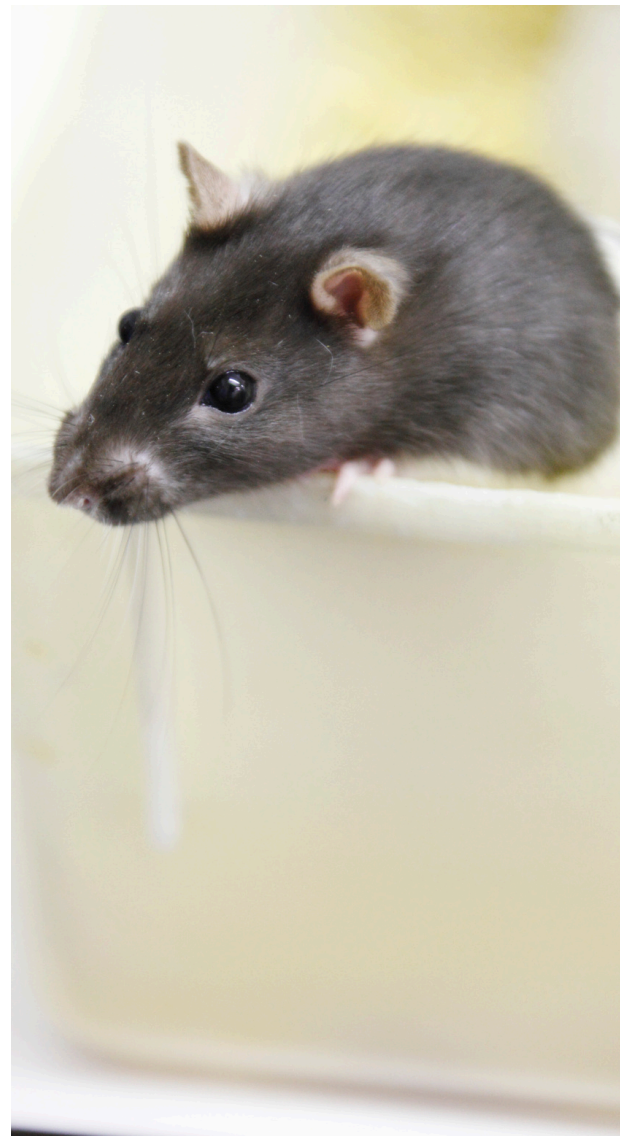
Summary

Introduction

During the 30th RSPCA Lay Members' Forum held in December 2023, participants took part in a 'Clean Set Up' exercise (Walker 2021), in which they provided written answers to the following three questions:

1. *For your **AWERB** to be the best it can be, what will it be like?*
2. *For your AWERB to be like that, what do **you** need to be like?*
3. *For you to be like that, what **support** do you need?*

These anonymous responses were analysed using an inductive thematic analysis approach (Braun and Clarke 2006). Themes and subthemes were extracted from the data to describe (i) 'the ideal AWERB' and (ii) 'what AWERB members need for the ideal AWERB'.

Themes and subthemes

The following themes and subthemes described the participants' vision of '**the ideal AWERB**':

1. **A space that encourages challenge of the status quo:** (i) challenges the ethical basis for animal use, at (ii) the individual level, and (iii) the establishment level.
2. **Committee organisation and governance:** (i) time, (ii) preparedness and efficiency, and (iii) chairing and secretariat.
3. **The AWERB meeting experience:** (i) a safe, open, welcoming space, (ii) meeting format and logistics, and (iii) building rapport between AWERB members.
4. **Inclusivity:** (i) access and accessibility, (ii) a diverse membership, and (iii) representation of all parties at the licensed establishment and beyond.
5. **Transparency**: (i) within the AWERB, and (ii) within the broader establishment and towards the public.
6. **Self-reflection and continuous improvement**

To describe '**what AWERB members need for the ideal AWERB**', the following themes were used:

1. **Competency and training:** (i) induction, (ii) continuing training opportunities, and (iii) feeling competent and well informed.
2. **Engagement**: (i) a challenging voice, (ii) dedicated AWERB time, and (iii) confidence and energy.
3. **Recognition**: (i) feeling valued and (ii) compensation.

Conclusion

Exploring these themes helps us to understand what AWERB members need and enable them to fully contribute to their committees. Our team focuses on:

- **Competency and training** - a key theme for AWERB members. We provide training materials and organise events to support AWERB members' training and promote engagement.
- Supporting AWERBs in their **self-reflection** and promoting continuous improvement.
- Promoting the sharing of best practice for AWERB **committee organisation and governance.**

In this report, we delve into these themes in more detail to fully understand the ideal AWERB, what members need to achieve this, and how we can support them.

1. Introduction

Animal Welfare and Ethical Review Bodies (AWERBs) and equivalent committees throughout the world play a crucial role in ensuring that animal use is effectively scrutinised from a range of perspectives, with every opportunity taken to implement the 3Rs within a good Culture of Care. Being an AWERB member is usually a voluntary, unpaid role that most members take on in addition to their full-time job. There is no specific formal training for AWERB members and there are limited opportunities to share experiences of how different committees operate and how members are inducted, trained, and supported.

The RSPCA Lay Members' Forum is an annual meeting that brings together AWERB members, lay and other, to discuss issues facing AWERBs and share best practice. As such, it represents a unique opportunity to explore the needs of AWERB members and understand how best to provide support. The 2023 Lay Members' Forum was run in person and included a full day of presentations and discussion opportunities. The final session of the day was designed as a self-reflective, introspective time during which participants were given the space to explore their ideas of the 'ideal' AWERB, as well as the skills, attributes, and support AWERB members need to achieve this.

In this report, we explore the participants' responses using thematic analysis and use the themes identified to generate action points that may be implemented to provide better support for AWERBs and their members.

Objectives

To gain a better understanding of:
- AWERB members' vision of 'the ideal AWERB';
- their perceived needs to maximise their contributions to the AWERB;
- what support should be provided to better empower AWERB members.
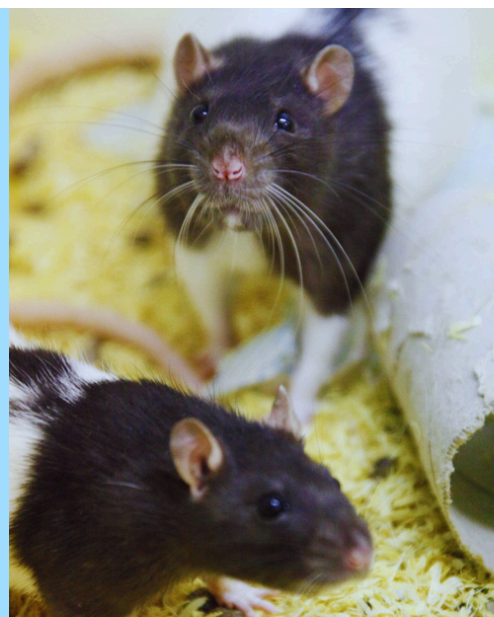
2. Methodology

RSPCA Lay Members' Forum 2023

Data for this study were collected during the 30th RSPCA Lay Members' Forum, which was held on 5 December 2023 in London. Prior to the event, participants completed a questionnaire to record their role on the AWERB and the number of years they had served. The event included presentations and discussion sessions during which participants could interact and network. A report of this event is available to view here.

The "Clean Set Up" exercise

As part of the final session of the day, delivered by Dr Bentley Crudgington and entitled '*Developing committee skills: approaches to deepening lay member participation*', participants provided anonymous, hand-written responses to three questions phrased according to the 'Clean Set Up' format (Walker 2021). The first question related to the participants' concept of the ideal AWERB ('For your AWERB to be the best it can be, what will it be like?'), while the next two questions focused on the role of the individual member in achieving this ideal ('For your AWERB to be like that, what do you need to be like?') and the support they require ('For you to be like that, what support do you need?'). Participants wrote their responses to these questions on sheets of paper provided by the organisers and handed these in at the end of the session. All responses were collected anonymously.

Analysis

Hand-written responses (n = 41) were digitised and analysed using an inductive thematic analysis approach (Braun and Clarke 2006). The data were coded by both researchers independently and then discussed. Codes were then grouped into themes and subthemes.

3. Participants

A total of 65 participants attended the Lay Members' Forum, representing 37 licensed establishments across the UK. Although the majority of attendees (n = 40) fulfilled the role of lay or independent member on an AWERB, a number of other roles were also represented (Figure 1). Other attendees who were not AWERB members (n = 14) included representatives from the Biotechnology and Biological Sciences Research Council (BBSRC), Non-Governmental Organisations (including the Fund for the Replacement of Animals in Medical Experiments [FRAME] and the National Centre for the 3Rs [NC3Rs]), and academic researchers. The time served on the AWERB varied and is shown in Figure 2.
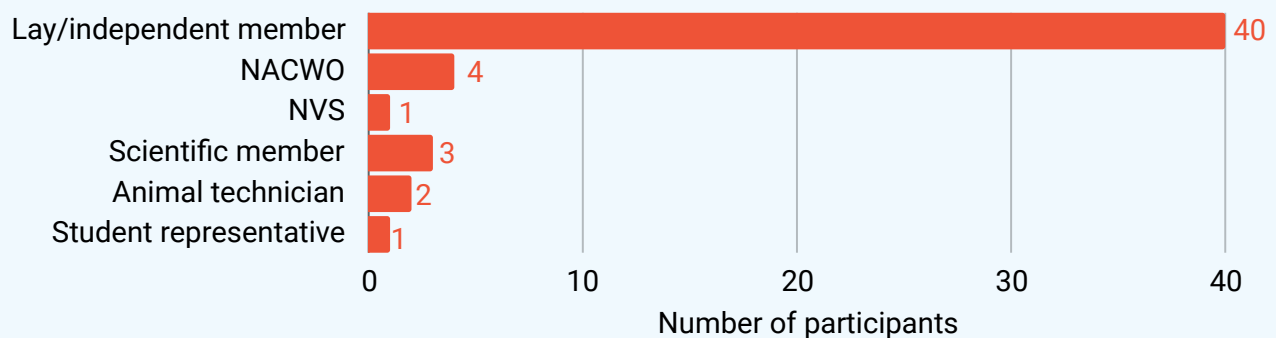

Figure 1. AWERB roles held by participants
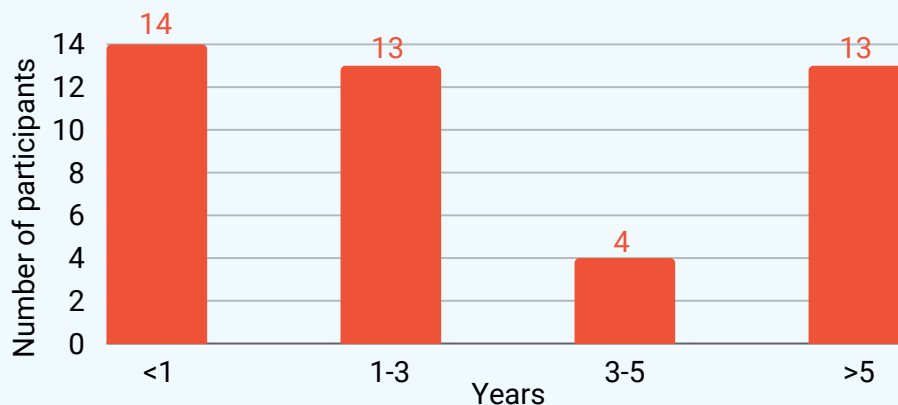NACWO, Named Animal Care and Welfare Officer; NTCO, NVS, Named Veterinary Surgeon.

Figure 2. Time served on the AWERB
n = 3 participants were yet to attend an AWERB meeting

4. The ideal AWERB - themes

Theme 1: A space that encourages challenge of the status quo

In providing short responses to the question *'For your AWERB to be the best it can be, what will it be like?'*, many participants pointed to the importance of the AWERB existing as a committee that **challenges the ethical basis for animal use**, both at the **individual level** and at the **establishment level**. The ability to 'challenge' with confidence both as individual AWERB members and as the AWERB within an establishment was identified as key to enabling a robust ethical discussion. At the individual level, participants mentioned:

*'**Any person** can ask **any question** or challenge anything.'*

*'I won't be kicked out if **I'm too challenging.**'*

Similarly, at the **establishment level**, participants mentioned the importance of the AWERB having the **power** ('powerful to make change' and 'empowered') and **respect** ('respected' and 'listened to') required to implement the committee's decisions and **effect change** within the institution:

*'An establishment that **accepts challenges of the status quo** in the way things are done.'*

*'**Senior management** at the establishment need to **take AWERB more seriously**.'*

*'An establishment that **recognises the importance of the AWERB** and provides sufficient resources for it to operate well.'*

Many participants highlighted the role of the AWERB as a space to challenge the **ethical basis for animal use**. Respondents mentioned putting '**ethics**' at the centre of discussions at the AWERB and addressing wider ethical issues and 'going beyond Project Licence applications' and 'challenging all aspects of animal research':

'Centre the "why" – why is this research being done.'

*'...prepared to spend time on **identifying and addressing ethical issues**.'*

*'It will be **critical of the broader systems of anthropocentrism** that animal research sits within and is enabled by.'*

Finally, the concept of the AWERB having an **intellectually robust approach** to ethical debate was brought up and ties in with the AWERB 'being taken seriously' by senior managerial staff at the establishment:

*'**Rigorous** in its approach.'*

*'More **stringent scrutiny** of what is done to animals.'*

Theme 2: Committee organisation and governance

This was an important and recurring theme, which comprises the three subthemes of (i) **time,** (ii) **preparedness and efficiency**, and (iii) **chairing and secretariat**. Issues associated with time were mentioned by the large majority of participants, many of whom felt they were not able to spend enough time on their duties to the AWERB:

> *'Time! I am busy as a named person **finding the hours in the day** to go through AWERB applications is **challenging and overwhelming, sometimes I end up rushing**.'*

Time pressures described by participants were also related to AWERB meetings and expectations of what can be achieved in a single meeting. Respondents felt that discussions at the AWERB were 'constrained by time' and would prefer 'not having as much crammed into one meeting': This was felt to **impact on the depth and breadth of discussions** taking place at the AWERB. Similarly, lack of time was associated with the **inability of the AWERB to fulfil all its functions**, beyond reviewing Project Licence applications:

> *'Only a few items to discuss/debate would be helpful - so I suppose it means **more time for each item to discuss all aspects** of it.'*

> *'Has time to **perform all its functions properly** and have **more in-depth discussions**.'*

Several participants made suggestions to reduce the effects of time paucity of the AWERB, including **keeping meetings to time**, having **shorter or more concise meetings** 'broken down into bite-sized chunks so more meetings per year rather than 'very long meetings that require a huge time commitment', and allocating **more time to each agenda item**.

The second subtheme was **preparedness and efficiency**, which included meetings being kept 'succinct', 'focused', and 'strategic'. Many participants mentioned the importance of having relevant papers and documents sent out in advance with plenty of time to review and having 'well-defined objectives and processes' and 'clear governance'. Finally, several participants wrote about having appropriate **support** from both the AWERB **secretary and chair**:

> *'A **good chair** to allow discussions to flow and **ensure all are given a space to speak.**'*

Theme 3: The AWERB meeting experience

This important theme comprised the following subthemes: (i) **a safe, open, and welcoming space**, (ii) **meeting format and logistics**, and (iii) **building rapport between AWERB members**. A 'safe space' in AWERB meetings was seen as crucial for many AWERB members to contribute fully and productively to the committee. Participants described this ideal space as 'friendly', 'fair', 'conversational', 'open to questions' (including questions that may be considered 'naive'), 'supportive', 'caring', 'non-hierarchical', and 'non-judgemental'.

With regard to **meeting format and logistics**, many participants mentioned wanting to have **some or most meetings in person,** with **coffee and biscuits** to improve meeting experience, and **having cameras on during online meetings** so committee members could see each other. This leads on to the subtheme of **building rapport between AWERB members**. Participants were keen to have more opportunities for informal interactions, networking, and discussions outside of regular AWERB meetings:

> *'Ability to **socialise with the members informally to build a rapport and support network**. More opportunities where lay members can discuss their input in a small subgroup.'*

Theme 4: Inclusivity

This theme comprised the related subthemes of (i) **access and accessibility**, (ii) **a diverse membership**, and (iii) **representation of all parties at the licensed establishment and beyond**. Participants wrote about this theme as 'everybody contributing', 'feeling included', and 'feeling empowered to participate'. One participant mentioned a 'round table, where **no opinion is greater than another**'. Another highlighted that 'suggestions and problems be addressed from all members and implemented'.

Access and accessibility referred to the 'availability of information in easily accessible form' and having 'pathways/policies in place to **make adjustments**'. Others mentioned using 'easy-to-understand language' and definitions.

> *'Information can be **accessed and processed** by individuals with **varied needs/abilities** e.g. processing speed, learning differences.'*

A diverse membership was described as one that 'includes a wide range of perspectives' with 'less hierarchy, more diversity'. Similarly, participants deemed it important for the AWERB to represent all parts of the establishment, particularly with regard to lay members and animal technologists:

> *'Includes… scientific [members] from **different disciplines**, **animal care staff**, **lay/independent** members.'*

> *'More **lay/public** representation, more **tech** [animal technologists] and **student** involvement.'*

> *'More lay members that are **actually lay members**.'*

Theme 5: Transparency

This theme included transparency (i) **within the AWERB** and (ii) **within the broader establishment and towards the public.** With regard to transparency within the AWERB, participants mentioned having access to '**clear descriptions** of animal work **with images**' as well as 'good reporting of current situations'. Several participants highlighted the usefulness of visiting the animal unit to 'see what it's all *really* about':

> *'**Visit the research teams** to find out about **their ambitions** and to see **how** they do their research.'*

Regarding transparency across the broader establishment and towards the public, participants felt that the AWERB should be 'prepared to **justify** and **explain its decisions to the wider public**' and should be 'more open and transparent **across the university and externally**':

> *'It [the AWERB] would **communicate** much better about what it does **internally and to the public**.'*

> *'**Civil society awareness** of process that should be taking place.'*

Theme 6: Self-reflection and continuous improvement

This theme refers to the AWERB being '**open** to criticality and **challenge of itself**' and 'seeking **continuous improvement**'. The concept of **self-reflection** and **self-assessment** was also mentioned, with participants highlighting the importance of **acting on self-assessment outcomes**. Finally, there were mentions of the AWERB's long-term goals and progression:

> *'Ask the question, make case for attention to **overall vision for unit in 10-15 years**, to open up change pathway.'*

> *'To check in with the **direction of travel within industry**, not just 3Rs.'*

5. What AWERB members need

Theme 1: Competency and training

AWERB members' needs regarding induction and training were recently explored in a survey study (read our full report here). It is unsurprising, therefore, that this theme was identified here as well. The following subthemes were also defined: (i) **induction**, (ii) **continuing training opportunities**, and (iii) **feeling competent and well informed**.

With regard to **induction**, participants required a good foundational 'understanding of the focus/requirements on the role' and 'guidance on roles and responsibilities'. This included knowledge gained not only during induction but also ongoing training such as continuing professional development (CPD).

Leading on to the theme of **continuing training opportunities**, participants were keen to have access to 'a more formal structured training program' and 'more training opportunities within and outside the establishment'. Participants mentioned requiring training for different needs, including committee skills, training designed specifically for lay members, and access to mentoring opportunities. Many mentioned the importance of **ongoing training**.

> *'I need to be given **guidance** on **where to find relevant information**.'*

The survey we conducted on AWERB members' experiences of induction and training highlighted the discrepancies in induction/training processes at different establishments and revealed that 14% of respondents had not received any induction at all when joining the AWERB. This lack of training and support understandably leads to members **feeling that they do not have the required skills and competence** to perform their role, as was highlighted here:

> *'I still **feel hopelessly inadequate**.'*

> *'Being **expected** to know/understand.'*

Furthermore, as was reported in our previous survey, participants in this study mentioned feeling the need to be **more knowledgeable** on discussions surrounding experimental design and Replacement:

> *'More au fait with **scientific terminology and methodology** so I have a **greater understanding of the actual science** involved.'*

Theme 2: Engagement

This theme comprised three subthemes: (i) **a challenging voice**, (ii) **dedicated AWERB time**, and (iii) **confidence and energy**. This first subtheme relates very closely to challenging the status quo, as seen in 'the ideal AWERB'. Here, participants used terms such as 'probing', 'greater challenger', and 'pushy' to describe their contributions as ideal AWERB members. This also included receiving the right support to raise issues:

> *'**Be the change** we want to see.'*

> *'I need to be **supported** when asking questions and **not shut down**.'*

Themes describing the ideal AWERB included **time**, a theme that appeared here as well. Many participants felt they were not able to dedicate enough time to the AWERB and would benefit from having 'dedicated' AWERB time, that was '**assigned**' or '**allocated**' within their working day. This included '**making AWERB more of a priority**' and ensuring members were 'prepared for the meeting' and had 'given [themselves] time to read documents'.

Finally, members spoke of the need to have the appropriate **confidence and energy** to contribute positively to AWERB meetings, using words such as 'dynamic', 'proactive', 'energetic', 'empowered', 'vocal', 'open and outgoing', and 'brave'.
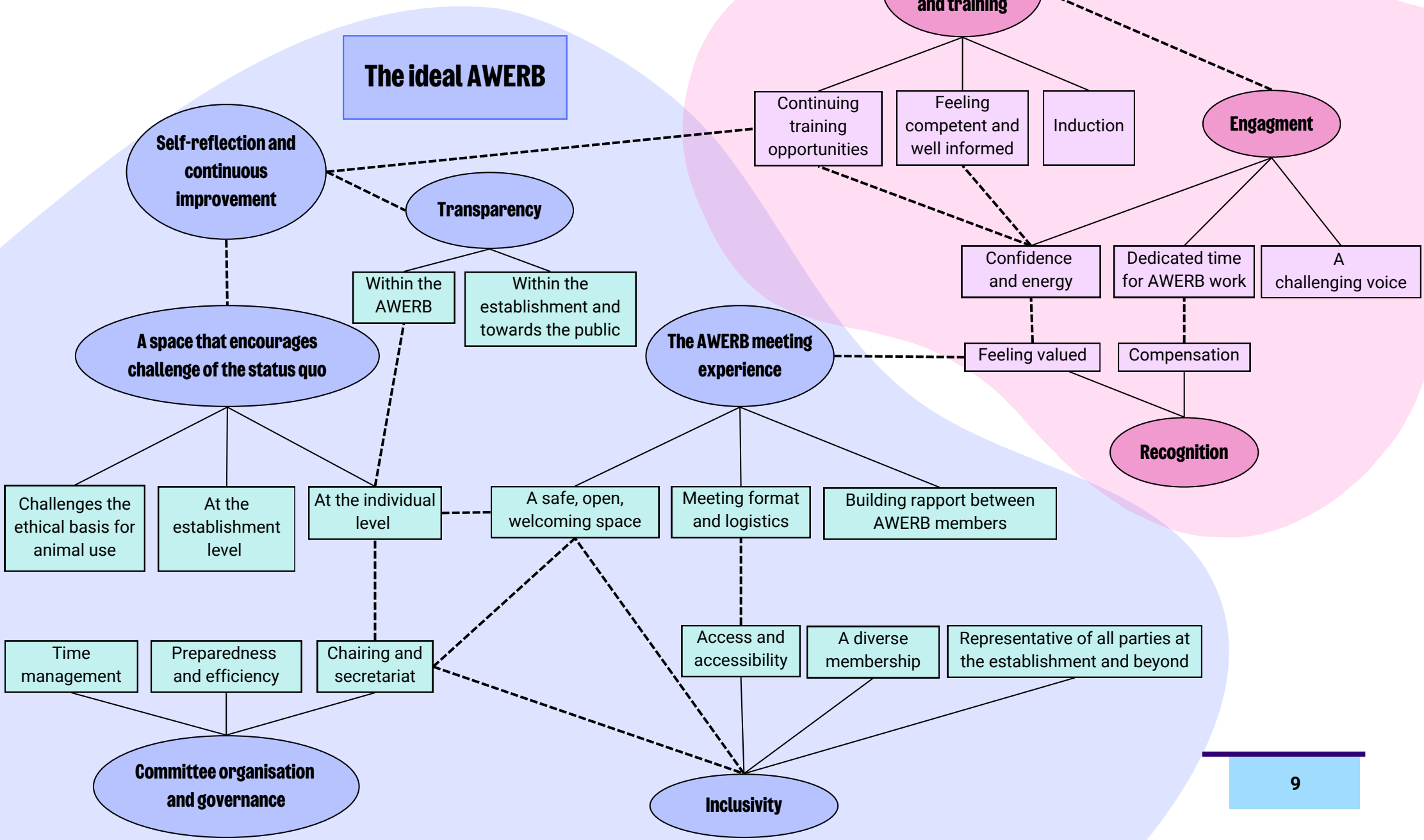
Theme 3: Recognition

Being an AWERB member is an unpaid role that members take on in addition to their other roles. Here, participants described the importance of (i) **feeling valued.** This included other members valuing their contributions and receiving positive feedback and recognition. Some members also mentioned (ii) **compensation**, encompassing both monetary compensation (with the suggestion that AWERB members be paid) but also acknowledging the time burden placed on committee members.

Thematic map

This map is a visual representation of the themes and subthemes identified (linked by solid lines) as well as the relationships between related themes (dotted lines).

What members need for the ideal AWERB

The ideal AWERB

Competency and training
- Continuing training opportunities
- Feeling competent and well informed
- Induction

Engagment
- Confidence and energy
- Dedicated time for AWERB work
- A challenging voice
- Feeling valued
- Compensation

Recognition

Self-reflection and continuous improvement

Transparency
- Within the AWERB
- Within the establishment and towards the public

A space that encourages challenge of the status quo
- Challenges the ethical basis for animal use
- At the establishment level
- At the individual level

The AWERB meeting experience
- A safe, open, welcoming space
- Meeting format and logistics
- Building rapport between AWERB members
- Access and accessibility
- A diverse membership
- Representative of all parties at the establishment and beyond

Committee organisation and governance
- Time management
- Preparedness and efficiency
- Chairing and secretariat

Inclusivity

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Conclusions

This analysis of responses to the Clean Set Up exercise carried out at the 2023 RSPCA Lay Members' Forum has highlighted some of the key themes that matter to AWERBs and their members. It has also revealed some of the challenges facing AWERB members and shown opportunities for improvement and areas in which committee members can and should be better supported.

Some of these issues are institutional and complex - it is widely acknowledged that AWERBs and AWERB members are **time-poor** and this may limit their impact and functioning. Although there is no easy solution to this problem, the effectiveness of an AWERB can be improved by ensuring that all its processes are optimised, that meetings are streamlined, and that all members are prepared ahead of each meeting. This is summed up in the theme of **committee organisation and governance** and it is important for AWERBs to assess their own processes and identify any areas that can be improved. Although this will not increase the amount of time and resources available to the AWERB, it can optimise the way in which these are used.

Our previous survey of AWERB induction and training highlighted inconsistencies and in some instances a complete lack of induction and training processes for new AWERB members. It was therefore unsurprising that the theme of **competency and training** featured again in this analysis. This is an area in which improvements can be made, relatively quickly and easily. AWERBs are encouraged to develop formal induction and training processes, which can be applied to all new committee members, as well as ongoing "refresher" training which should be available to all members. AWERBs can develop their own in-house induction/training materials and should also give their members access to training materials from other sources such as the RSPCA, Home Office, and independent training providers.

Action points

- **Assess AWERB processes** (e.g., meeting structure, PPL review process, including sharing of relevant documents, approaches to fulfilling all AWERB tasks etc.). Ensure these are optimised to make the most of the time and resources available to the AWERB.

- **Promote a positive meeting experience** for AWERB members - this includes both in-person and online meetings. Consider providing refreshments during in-person meetings and give members opportunities to connect informally or outside of regular AWERB meetings to build rapport and a sense of team spirit.

- This will in turn contribute to **fostering inclusivity and a nurturing space that encourages challenge.** If you feel that your AWERB performs particularly poorly in this area, you could include specific activities to improve inclusivity and diversity and you may wish to consult the Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) lead at your establishment for advice.

- **Promote transparency**, starting with your AWERB and moving out into the wider establishment. This can include inviting AWERB members to visit the animal unit or organising a presentation about animal research at the establishment to all staff, including those who do not work in the animal unit. Transparency is important to AWERB members.

- To improve engagement from AWERB members, it is important for them to gain **recognition** and feel their contributions are valued. Being an AWERB member is generally an unpaid role but recognition can be given in non-monetary ways as well, for example by actively listening to and implementing suggestions from all AWERB members and upholding people's voices.

- AWERB members can also be made to feel valued by giving them **access to training and continuous development opportunities**. It is clear that training is an ongoing issue for AWERB members and providing appropriate and relevant training opportunities will ensure AWERB members contribute effectively to the committee and let them know that they are valued contributors.

Our work

Key resources

The RSPCA Animals in Science team has been producing resources and organising training workshops for AWERB member since the inception of formal ethical review bodies in the UK.

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

These resources are currently undergoing revision and new versions will be made available throughout 2024/25. All of our resources are available on the RSPCA AWERB Directory.

Workshops and training

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 (2h-half day)
- Maximising the effectiveness of your AWERB: advising on ethics, Project Licence applications, training for AWERB members, and AWERB self-assessment (full day)

These can be tailored for an establishment's specific needs, so do get in touch with animalsinscience@rspca.org.uk should you be interested in running one of these workshops at your establishment.

We also hold our annual Lay Members' Forum in December - do keep an eye on our newsletter and LinkedIn page for details closer to the time.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank Dr Bentley Crudgington for designing and facilitating this session at the 2023 RSPCA Lay Members' Forum and all our participants for taking part.
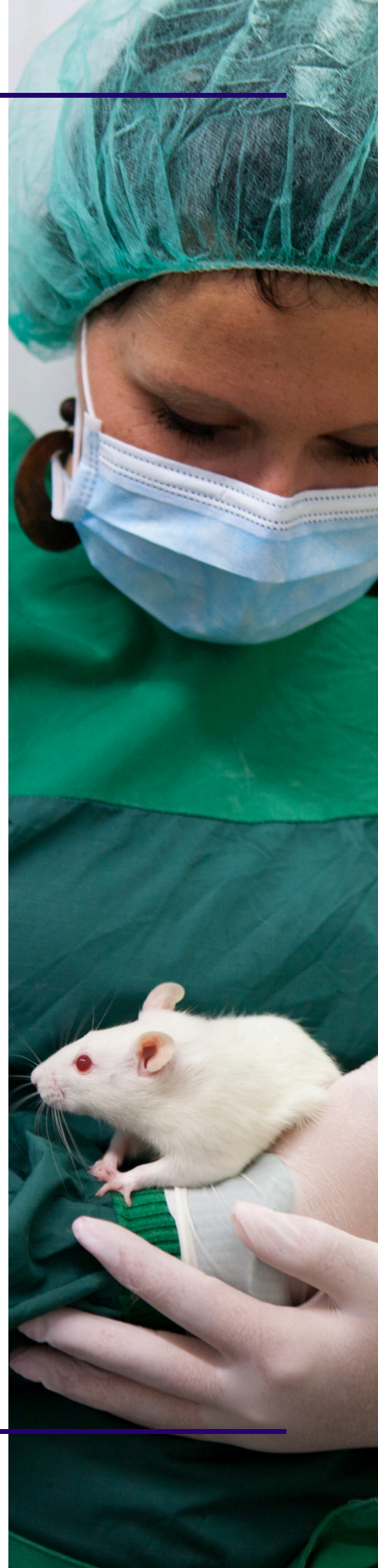
Keep in touch

Over the next few months, we will be producing new resources to address the knowledge gaps highlighted in this survey. We really value your input and thoughts as all our work in this area is guided by what AWERB members tell us they need. If you have any suggestions, comments, or questions at any 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.

🌐 RSPCA Animals in Science website

✉ animalsinscience@rspca.org.uk

in Animals in Science on LinkedIn

𝕏 Animals in Science on Twitter/X