



## Minutes of the Board meeting – 6 September 2023

### Present

Professor Kevin Shakesheff (KS) *Chair*

Professor Cathy Abbott (CA)

Dr Robin Buckle (RB)

Professor Christopher George (CG)

Ms Linda Horan (LH)

Professor Jane Hurst (JH)

Dr Tom Matheson (TM)

Professor Nick Plant (NP)

Dr Vicky Robinson (VR)

Dr Clive Roper (CR)

### Office members attending

Mrs Vanessa Chauhan (VC) *item 4*

Dr Natalie Carter (NC) *item 5*

Dr Natalie Burden (NB) *item 5*

Dr Anthony Holmes (AH)

Dr Nathalie Percie du Sert (NPdS) *item 6*

Ms Kayleigh Purdon (KP) *Secretariat*

Dr Fiona Sewell (FS) *item 5*

Ms Emma Stokes (ES)

### Welcome

1. KS welcome members to the meeting, noting apologies from Professor Paul Evans, Professor Cathy Merry, Dr Sally Robinson and Dr Sadhana Sharma.

### Board minutes 6 June 2023

2. The minutes from the June meeting were agreed to be an accurate account of the discussions.

### Chief Executive update

3. The Board noted the paper on business activities and the oral update from VR. This included a discussion on the appointment of the new NC3Rs Board Chair, staff resource, the external operating environment, research and innovation funding and staff-led programmes.

#### Board Chair appointment

Professor Julia Buckingham has been appointed the new NC3Rs Board Chair, with an official announcement made in August. Professor Buckingham's tenure will commence in January 2024. VR asked Board members to attend the stakeholder event on 24 October.

### Staff resource

- VR highlighted that the senior management team continue to monitor workloads and programme priorities taking into account ongoing challenges with staff levels. The Board noted that Dr Mark Prescott had left the NC3Rs at the end of August and acknowledged his contributions over the past 18 years. Changes to the regional programme have been implemented and staff have been allocated their first choice roles. The NC3Rs staff results from the UKRI People survey were very positive, with staff indicating that they feel valued, respected, and engaged. One area of concern highlighted in the survey was salaries which is consistent with the data across UKRI.

### External environment

- The external landscape continues to be busy with regulatory reform programme and interest across Government in the use of non-animal technologies. . VR had participated in a meeting with the Home Office Minister, Lord Sharpe, on the regulatory reform programme and contributed to a UKRI briefing on non-animal methods requested by the Science Minister's Office. The Board welcomed the Animals in Science Regulation Policy Unit's commitment to a greater emphasis on the 3Rs in its draft strategic priorities and noted the specific reference to searching for replacement technologies and the importance of progressing the NC3Rs project on this.
- VR highlighted the rapid acceleration in interest in non-animal approaches globally, with for example, the Director of the National Institute of Health (NIH) establishing an expert group to advise on actions to support novel alternative methods. The Board noted the NC3Rs submission to the recent NIH consultation. VR informed the Board that the NC3Rs proposal to the UKRI/DSIT moonshot initiative had not progressed to the next round.
- VR informed the Board that the team were well represented at the [World Congress on Alternatives](#) in Niagara Falls with presentations and sessions on a range of key NC3Rs programmes, including joint activities with the Coalition for Epidemic Preparedness Innovations and the 3Rs Collaborative (3RsC). VR noted that following discussion with KS, the NC3Rs had declined to support a UK bid to host the next Congress.

### Research funding and innovation

- Seven project grant awards, totally £3M were made in July, with five awards focusing on replacement.
- 70 outline applications were received for the 2023 PhD Studentship call with 66 in remit. A total of 58 full applications will be assessed by the panel in October. This was the first NC3Rs funding scheme run using the new UKRI funding service and the first time the call had focused on non-animal technologies only.
- The annual PhD summer school was held in-person for the first time since the pandemic. The event took place in June and was attended by 12 NC3Rs-funded students and four students from

the University of Liverpool. The focus of the event was primarily on communication skills with each student preparing an elevator pitch to describe their project. A writing retreat for 18 NC3Rs training fellows and postdocs employed on NC3Rs-funded grants was also held in June. The retreat offered hands-on-training with an external provider on how to write a successful grant application, participate in a mock panel and time to work on their own applications/manuscripts. Both events for early career researchers received excellent feedback.

- A review on how the Technologies to Tools competition can better support the commercialisation of 3Rs technologies developed through NC3Rs funding is being undertaken and as result the 2023 call will not run. A detailed update will be presented at the November Board meeting.
- The 2023 CRACK IT Challenges have been launched with a budget of £4M available. The Challenges include the second Mega-Challenge which focuses on improving the utility and reproducibility of connected organ-on-a-chip devices by integrating real-time multiparametric monitoring.
- A technology partnering event was held in July showcasing technologies with 3Rs potential. The event was well attended with 60 delegates participating and positive feedback has been received, including request from other SMEs to present their products and services.

#### Staff-led programmes

- The experimental design team have been working with Dr Frances Rawle to follow-up on the recommendations set out her report on the review and oversight processes for animal research and the 3Rs in the UK. A preprint of the RIVER recommendations was published at the end of June. The manuscript is currently under review and ethical approval is being sought to undertake a user testing study with researchers preparing publications describing *in vitro* experiments.
- A total of 101 applications have been assessed by the animal welfare and peer review team since the start of 2023 (a large increase compared to the 2022 number). The team are reviewing processes to ensure quality is maintained while also focusing on efficient ways of working. The plan is to provide training to others in the team to help support the resilience of the service at times of high demand. The online e-learning course on refined mouse handling, in partnership with the 3RsC has been launched at the World Congress on Alternatives.
- Members requested a detailed update be provided at the November Board meeting on the replacement technology programme, noting that progress had been delayed and that there was a need to allocate more resource to it.

#### **Finance update**

- VC provided a mid-year update on the NC3Rs accounts for 2023/24. The accounts are in a good position and VC continues to monitor spend closely. The Board noted the ongoing challenges with inflation and the need to be flexible and agile.

## **NC3Rs workplan 2024/25**

4. Theme leads for safety sciences (NB and FS) and academic engagement (NC) updated the Board on activities and plans for 2024/25.

### Safety sciences

- The Board were supportive of the plans for the next 12 months, recognising the importance of delivering the full impacts from current and past projects (where impacts could take many years) and better coordinating across the team activities focused on new approach methodologies for drug and chemical safety assessment. The Board stressed the importance of utilising the NC3Rs convening power.

### Academic engagement

- The Board were supportive of the plans to formally launch the new regional programme in 2024 and noted the current activities being undertaken to support this as well as maintain the excellent relationships with organisations that had previously had a dedicated NC3Rs programme manager.

## **Update on the NC3Rs key performance indicators (KPIs)**

5. NPdS presented the refined KPIs that took account of previous feedback from the Board to streamline the number of areas included. The organisational KPIs now focus on ten areas across three thematic areas:
  - Funding 3Rs models and technologies for scientists to use in their research.
  - Equipping scientists and technical staff with the knowledge and tools to apply the 3Rs in their own work.
  - Creating a supportive environment for the 3Rs by influencing key stakeholders and decision-makers.
6. The Board endorsed the KPIs and noted that metrics that have been collected to date.

## **AOB**

7. CR highlighted the polarised dynamic at the recent World Congress on Alternatives and stressed the importance of the NC3Rs event attendance policy and the need to provide an environment to allow safe and open discussion on the use of animals and 3Rs opportunities.