

MINUTES of the Bioscience for Society Strategy Panel Meeting held on 17 September 2010 at the Medical Research Council, London.

Those attending:-

Panel Members

Professor A Irwin, Chair
Professor K Boyd
Professor D Burke CBE
Professor R Dingwall
Dr B Johnson
Dr R Dyer
Dr S Knapp
Dr G Rowe
Professor V Walsh

BBSRC Office

Prof Douglas Kell
Mr P Gemmill
Dr P Middleton

Apologies

Dr T MacMillan
Mr S Walker
Sir Roland Jackson
Ms W Barnaby
Professor L Archer

1. Chairman's Introduction and Report

- 1.1. The Chair, Prof Irwin, noted that this meeting would be his last and extended this thanks to other members and Swindon office staff. Prof Irwin also noted that Dr Brian Johnson, Prof Derek Burke and Prof Louise Archer would also be leaving the panel and thanked them for their work over the years.
- 1.2. Prof Irwin informed the panel that the BBSRC Appointments Board will be meeting on 30 September to select replacement members (and consider the reappointment of some existing members). Appointments Board will also approve the new chair of the panel and their decision will be submitted for ratification by BBSRC Council at their meeting on 11/12 October. For future appointments BBSRC will try to ensure that the appointments process is moved forward such that appointments and re-appointments are confirmed before the last meeting of the panel.
- 1.3. Prof Irwin reminded the panel that at the last meeting the panel asked for clarification of the role of the Bioscience for Industry strategy panel (BSI) and directed the panel to a short summary paper on BSI attached to the last meeting's minutes.
- 1.4. The chair invited Mr Gemmill to comment on the likely impact of the upcoming Spending Review on BBSRC in general and on communications and public engagement specifically.
- 1.5. Mr Gemmill took the opportunity to formally thank the retiring members. He then outlined the delivery plan scenarios that the Department for Business Innovation and Skills (BIS) have asked the research councils to prepare, (a) flat cash, real terms c.-10%; (b) minus 10%, real terms c.-20%; and (c) minus 20%, real terms c.-30%. Mr Gemmill stressed that

the BBSRC delivery plan highlighted where BBSRC's strengths lie, in particular around cross-cutting themes on which it leads such as Global Food Security.

- 1.6. Discussion followed on the effect the potential funding cuts may have on communications and public engagement activities of BBSRC. Professor Kell indicated that due to the relatively low cost of these activities, and recognising their importance, they would probably be continued, though in-line with the Government communications spend restrictions.
- 1.7. Dr Dyer enquired whether cuts to BBSRC activity would be 'salami sliced' or affect some areas more than others. Mr Gemmill suggested that rather than weaken all areas of BBSRC it was more likely that some areas may see more significant reductions in investment – but that Council would decide on this strategy.

2. Round table of issues (standing item)

- 2.1. Dr Middleton noted that the Food Standards Agency GM dialogue had been officially stopped and that the Minister of State for Universities and Science had called for a review of the project. Prof Burke told the panel that he had been invited to write an article in *People & Science* on how a GM dialogue might be more successful.
- 2.2. Dr Johnson told the panel that he had recently spoken in Copenhagen about the BBSRC/EPSRC Synthetic Biology dialogue and that the international audience was very interested to hear about the project. Prof Irwin noted that there was substantial interest in the dialogue from around the world.

3. Minutes of the meeting held on 7 May 2010

- 3.1. Dr Johnson asked that into para. 6.2, the first sentence should be modified to be clear that the first stage of the dialogue has been concluded.
- 3.2. With this change the panel approved the minutes.

4. Horizon Scanning – next steps

- 4.1. Prof Irwin introduced this paper and invited the panel to suggest how the work might be taken forward, perhaps through establishing a sub-group.
- 4.2. There was some discussion on the contents of the record of the workshop. In particular around point 2 under question one which states, "the possibility that consensus and innate conservatism in science will hold back scientific development". The panel suggested changing the word consensus to, "convergence of opinion" or "search for consensus". Prof Burke noted that with reduced funding in the future the scientific community is likely to take less risk and become even more conservative. In illustration of this problem Dr Dyer asked how many new NC3R techniques have been disseminated and adopted?
- 4.3. Prof Walsh noted that science is now very much a normal career and that, for instance, PhD students worry about their next paper they do not spend time worrying about the same things that BSS does, such as knowledge.
- 4.4. The panel were broadly agreed that the change in panel chair and new incoming membership should have a big role in shaping how the BSS and BBSRC take forward the outcomes of the workshop. In particular the panel suggested:
 - that other panels and strategic bodies in BBSRC should be engaged with this process, through, perhaps, asking committees and panels to answer the same

- questions or consider BSS's answers and adding their own
 - synthetic biology might be used as an exemplar to focus others' thinking
 - the discussion around 'nature' and 'naturalness' should be explored in more detail, perhaps in concert with the Nuffield Councils on Bioethics
- 4.5. Dr Johnson encouraged the panel to consider its remit as the bioscience in society, rather than the sociology of science, and that BSS's work should continue to look outside of BBSRC and the scientific community.
- 5. Response to the Synthetic Biology Dialogue**
- 5.1. Dr Middleton introduced this paper. Dr Johnson, in his role as chair of the dialogue's steering and oversight groups commented next, making the following points. The completion of this project must be seen as the first stage in an ongoing dialogue. Processes such as these are inherently messy and evaluation is very important. The report contains interesting insights, in particular there was support for the science and public participants wanted to see scientists questioning their motivations for doing the research. Dr Johnson was clear that BBSRC must respond to the report. He thought there could be a role for the public to play in shaping future research programmes and encouraged the embedding of public engagement in science more generally.
- 5.2. Dr Rowe, suggested that before BSS could endorse the report it would be important to know how the information in the report was collated and translated into the conclusions. Dr Rowe noted that the report contained very little information on the methodology used by TNS-BMRB.
- 5.3. The panel discussed the potential role for 'lay people' in setting research direction or sitting on grant assessment panels. Prof Burke noted that people outside of the research community get impatient with the very high levels of paper involved in grant assessment. He indicated BBSRC should take a new direction and suggested that BBSRC could account for wider views in its policy setting by including three members on Council who would could take responsibility for considering social and ethical issues and could be charged with the management of future dialogues. Dr Dyer suggested that it would be useful to include these skills on Council but that three new members may be unnecessary. Dr Knapp and others reminded the panel that outside of their narrow areas of expertise scientists are members of the public too. Prof Dingwall highlighted that while Council does contain 'users' these are invariably industrialists, considering the role of 'users' more widely would allow Council to broaden its membership to include other perspectives.
- 5.4. The role that BSS plays in assessing the ethical and other social issues in grant applications was discussed by the panel. It was generally agreed that this process is very important and should be reviewed to include an audit function and that BBSRC should make sure that this function is widely publicised.
- 5.5. The panel generally agreed that there were many positive points in the report, but that the conclusions tended to focus on the more negative messages.
- 5.6. Prof Irwin summarised the discussion by suggesting that BSS should recommend the report to Council as a foundation for future discussion and that BBSRC should:
- ensure Council membership contains the expertise to be able to respond directly to issues of a social and ethical nature
 - be more explicit about how it operates its ethical review and consider setting up a discrete panel with an auditing function

- note that the results for this dialogue apply broadly across many areas of BBSRC's remit and not just synthetic biology
- discuss the report and its messages with other BBSRC panels
- encourage further dialogue with regulators
- consider the publication of the report as only the first stage in an ongoing dialogue around synthetic biology
- consider how to use 'lay' expertise in shaping future research areas
- note that the scientists involved in the process also valued it highly

5.7. Finally the panel encouraged BBSRC to provide a positive and constructive response to the report and to take a lead on disseminating its messages.

6. *Update: BBSRC Bioenergy Public Engagement*

6.1. Dr Middleton introduced this paper, which the panel noted with some comments.

6.2. Dr Rowe alerted the panel to the New Economics Foundation's Democs games, bioenergy may be a good candidate for developing a new game set.

6.3. Prof Knapp noted that we must continue to consider the environmental impact of any future bioenergy solutions and Dr Johnson encouraged BBSRC to engage with industry and to discuss bioenergy in the broader context.

7. *New models for public engagement*

7.1. Dr Middleton introduced this paper and invited comments from the panel.

7.2. Dr Johnson encouraged BBSRC to use the web as a tool for public engagement, particularly for garnering public opinion.

7.3. Prof Boyd suggested working with existing energy providers and other organisations such as the Society of Biology and Women's Institute.

7.4. Prof Dingwall suggested that any distributed public engagement might benefit from a standard set of question that could be used at all events. The BBSRC Champion could act as the hub to draw together the various aspects of a distributed public engagement programme.

7.5. The panel asked the office to further refine their thinking on this subject before bringing another paper to the panel.

8. *Update: Institute Assessment Exercise*

8.1. The panel noted the paper.

8.2. Prof Boyd registered a conflict of interest with the Roslin Institute.

8.3. The panel asked to know the timetable for invitations of members to the Institute Assessment Panels.

9. *BBSRC's communications & science in society programme*

9.1. The panel noted the paper

10. *Any other business*

10.1. Dr Middleton alerted the panel to the upcoming Networks in Synthetic Biology second year reports and asked the panel if they would be able to comment by email on the social science and public engagement aspects of the reports. The panel agreed that it could.