

**MINUTES** of the Bioscience for Society Strategy Panel Meeting held on 17 October 2008 at the Medical Research Council, London.

Those attending:-

**Panel Members**

Professor A Irwin, Chair  
Dr D Boak  
Professor K Boyd  
Professor D Burke CBE  
Professor R Dingwall  
Dr R Dyer  
Dr B Johnson  
Dr M Levitt  
Dr T MacMillan

**BBSRC Office**

Dr P Burrows  
Dr C Caulcott  
Dr S Fortune  
Mr P Gemmill  
Professor D Kell  
Dr M Winstanley

**Apologies**

Dr L Archer  
Professor D Bell  
Professor C Nicol  
Mrs V Parry

**Courtesies**

Professor Irwin welcomed everyone and noted that Prof Kell, Dr Burrows, Dr Caulcott and Mr Gemmill, from BBSRC, had also been invited

**1. Introduction from BBSRC's new Chief Executive, Professor Douglas Kell**

1.1 Prof Kell thanked the Panel members for their work and encouraged them to become more strategic and proactive. In outlining some recent and future changes in BBSRC, Prof Kell stressed the importance of more efficient information management, both internally and externally. Prof Kell raised several issues that he regarded as particularly important for the Panel. These included the increased access to facts and non-facts through the web, and the impact this has had on the way science is done and communicated. He highlighted how the semantic (intelligent) web will enable more meaningful searches and allow users to access vast amounts of information and papers; and he described associated issues such as open access and licensing. The Panel discussed how the web and internet TV might provide an opportunity to interact with a broader range of people, but noted how the specialisation of science had made communication with the public more difficult.

1.2 Prof Kell suggested that the web was changing our approach to scientific knowledge and that useful lessons might be learnt from people with expertise in the 'history of science'. The Panel suggested that looking at how the changing nature of scientific knowledge extends beyond the scientific community may fall within its remit,

although it was not certain that much of originality or uniqueness would emerge, as commentaries on the advent of writing, printing and mass literacy were quite similar. Overall, the Panel felt that Prof Kell had raised an interesting and challenging agenda, which pushed Research Council boundaries. The Panel raised as important topics- economics and IPR, and public criticism of some aspects of commercialisation and lack of access to information e.g. as a result of commercial confidentiality.

## **2. Minutes of the meeting held on 16 May 2008**

2.1 The Panel APPROVED the minutes as a true record of the meeting, subject to the rephrasing of the sentence on international food security.

## **3. Matters Arising and Chair's Report**

3.1 Prof Irwin reported on the new appointments, reappointments and retirements from the BSS Panel, which will take effect from 1 January 2009. He thanked the retiring members, Christine Nicol, Derek Bell and Vivienne Parry, for their contributions to the Panel.

3.2 Prof Irwin provided an update on the July 2008 meeting of Council and Strategy Board. The meeting had focussed on broad scientific issues: 1) the food supply chain, 2) the future of the pharmaceutical industry, including its relationship with BBSRC and 3) bioinformatics, and the issue of data overload.

3.3 Prof Irwin stressed that BSS should not be the only place for societal and ethical issues to be discussed and that other committees should come more fully on board.

## **4. Update on Synthetic Biology**

4.1 Dr Winstanley informed the Panel that a Chatham House rule meeting had taken place which brought together representatives from regulatory advisory panels, Research Councils and members of their respective strategy panels, and officials from Government Departments. The meeting had been chaired by Prof Alan Thorpe, the Chief Executive of NER C, and Dr Johnson had led a discussion of generic questions and scenarios aimed at helping identify, anticipate and address any societal issues that might arise from synthetic biology. Members of the Panel who had taken part in the meeting commented that it had been extremely useful, and that the questions posed were wide ranging and challenging. They also added that almost all synthetic biology appeared to be covered by existing regulatory procedures. BBSRC will publish an initial public statement that the meeting had taken place, followed by a more detailed statement in due course.

4.2 The Panel debated the novelty of synthetic biology and generally agreed that the fundamentals were not new: what was new was the way that technologies are coming together to produce new outputs.

4.3 Dr Winstanley informed the Panel of a forthcoming meeting between BBSRC and EPSRC to scope out the next steps for public engagement around synthetic biology. The initial proposal was for an interim scoping study consisting of facilitated discussions, identifying the important areas, language and methodologies to be used. Further work in this area would include involvement from other interested parties, such as the Royal Society and Royal Academy of Engineering. The Panel was invited to provide advice on how BBSRC might move towards public engagement around synthetic biology. The Panel commented on the difficulties of moving towards public engagement, including the issue of discussing synthetic biology before products are available, low current public awareness of synthetic biology and the

association with genetically modified organisms (GMOs). An alternative focus might be to consider general priorities around synthetic biology e.g. public-private funding and purpose of the research. A member suggested that the Nuffield Council for Bioethics might also provide helpful advice.

4.4 The Panel noted the letter from Prof Dave Delpy, Chief Executive of EPSRC, to BBSRC's Chief Executive, Prof Doug Kell, which provided support for the proposal to commission a joint public dialogue exercise on synthetic biology. Dr Johnson also updated the Panel on his attendance at EPSRC's Societal Issues Panel (SIP) where he had outlined what synthetic biology is, what it has achieved to date and likely next steps. In discussing future public debate, he reported that SIP had felt it was not in a position for public debate, but it was in favour of framing some issues with the public e.g. asking the public what might concern them most.

## **5. BBSRC GM statement – next steps**

5.1 The Panel was informed that the new position statement on GM, which had been updated with help from several Panel members, Swindon Office staff and Institute Directors, was available on BBSRC's website; and that the statement had been discussed by BBSRC Council on 7 October 2008.

5.2 The Panel discussed how the statement was not seen as supportive enough of GM by some, whilst others suggested that the statement was adequate in outlining BBSRC's position. A member suggested that it would be useful to find what the benefits are, as perceived by the public, and what was considered non-beneficial. Differences in public opinion over GM trials compared to GM crops were also discussed, as well as varying attitudes between different groups of people.

## **6. BBSRC priority skills areas: consultation**

6.1 Dr Caulcott, the new Director of Innovation and Skills at BBSRC, introduced this paper and invited the Panel to discuss the research skills needed to support the Panel's strategic area. Dr Caulcott stressed that this was an important exercise for BBSRC and that the revision of the strategy panels had given rise to a new Bioscience Skills and Careers Strategy Panel which was key to BBSRC delivering in this area. Dr Caulcott highlighted the need to address ethical and social responsibility as part of the wider skills required by bioscience researchers.

6.2 The Panel commented that there was a gap in funding at the postgraduate level to allow bioscientists to focus on ethical and social issues, and that there was now a narrow definition of ethical and social research, with areas such as business skills moving out of social science departments to business schools. It was also felt that biologists did not fully value social science. The Panel also commented that biology was not very good at supporting continuing professional development and this had led to a reduction in broader teaching for biologists. It was suggested that bioscientists should realise the importance of acquiring different skills e.g. advocacy, management, business, social science, ethics etc, and that these could possibly be obtained by having placements elsewhere.

## **7. Strategy Panel input to BBSRC's new Strategic Plan**

7.1 Dr Burrows, BBSRC Head of Corporate Policy and Strategy, presented this paper and invited the Panel to comment on the initial draft framework for BBSRC's new Strategic Plan 2009-2014. The Panel was asked to comment on several questions including the key elements for Bioscience over the next 10-20 years, any gaps in the framework and how public engagement should be addressed. They Panel was also invited to provide advice on the breadth and approach for the spring 2009 consultation.

7.2 The Panel advised that there should be a clear public purpose at this level, and that science for the public good as well as economic impact should be included in the strategy. It was also important to find out what motivates people (aims and benefits) and not just take a top down approach. The strategy should also demonstrate a commitment to work with scientists across the science areas. The Panel commented that ethics had an important role in driving BBSRC's priorities and that ethics and society should be upfront and permeate the whole document. General isolated statements about public engagement were thought to sound superficial.

## **8. BBSRC Technology Strategy**

8.1 The Panel was informed that the BBSRC Technology Strategy was currently under review, and that a meeting had been held with BSI members and industry representatives from BBSRC's Panels, Committees and Club Steering Groups to review existing priorities, identify gaps and consider coordination with strategies of the Technology Strategy Board. The Panel was invited to advise on how societal issues should be addressed within the different areas and identify any additional priorities.

8.2 The Panel suggested that it was important to embed user needs within BBSRC's broad strategy and that foresight should be introduced into the process. The Panel agreed to send any further comments to the Bioscience for Industry Strategy Panel.

## **9. BBSRC's science in society programme for 2008**

9.1 The Panel noted the programme. The Secretariat agreed to provide more comprehensive information for future meetings, which would provide a more complete picture of BBSRC's activities.