

BBSRC COUNCIL MEETING

12 October 2009

UPDATE ON PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT ACTIVITIES

SUMMARY

The attached note summarises BBSRC's approach to public engagement and provides examples from current and recent activities.

ACTION

Council is invited to **DISCUSS** BBSRC's work in public engagement and its contribution to national effort.

Communications and Information Management Group
September 2009

BBSRC's public engagement activities

Introduction

1. At its July 2009 meeting Council requested information on BBSRC's public engagement programme. This note summarises BBSRC's approach and provides examples from current and recent activities.

Definition

2. Public engagement is an umbrella term for any Science in Society activities, from communication in festivals, science centre to dialogue. Good engagement activities should involve aspects of listening and interaction.

BBSRC's aims and programme

3. The principal aim of BBSRC's public engagement programme is to contribute to a positive relationship between bioscience research and wider UK society. We seek to do this through a transparent and participatory approach to presenting and discussing the research we fund, and its impacts and implications. We place emphasis on identifying the needs, aspirations and concerns of the wider public around bioscience, and ensuring that BBSRC addresses these in its strategic planning, funding and communication activities.
4. BBSRC's programme of public engagement is
 - guided and overseen by the Bioscience for Society Strategy Panel (Annex 1) chaired by Professor Alan Irwin of Copenhagen Business School, membership including Dr Richard Dyer OBE, Chief Executive of the former Biosciences Federation, Sir Roland Jackson of the British Science Association and the leading science writer and former chair of the Association of British Science Writers, Wendy Barnaby
 - led by BBSRC's External Relations Unit (ERU) in the Communications and Information Management Group (CIMG). Elements are integrated as appropriate, and through a combined strategy with BBSRC's corporate communications, which are also led by ERU.
 - designed to fit within, and contribute to the delivery of objectives of, related activities by: Government (e.g. BIS Science for All Expert Group {<http://interactive.bis.gov.uk/scienceandsociety/site/science-for-all/>}; RCUK {<http://www.rcuk.ac.uk/sis/default.htm>}; BBSRC Institutes and Centres; and other bodies e.g. Royal Society, British Science Association)
5. The 2009-10 budget for BBSRC public engagement is £1M, around 30% of which supports collaborative activities under the RCUK umbrella, and a further 20% supports activities at the BBSRC institutes. We use a mix of approaches:
 - **Science communication:** one way provision of information
 - **Opinion research:** opinions are collected for consideration, but without in-depth discussion of the issues

- **Consultation:** formal process allowing reaction and response to policies/proposals
 - **Public dialogue:** deliberative, participatory engagement where outcomes inform decision-making
6. Our public engagement programme complements, and is integrated with, our corporate communication/PR activities. The latter includes media relations, corporate website, events and publications (e.g. Bioscience:Biomillions event 2008;Innovator of the Year 2009, Adam the Robot scientist etc) that focus on promoting the aims and achievements of BBSRC and BBSRC-funded science to stakeholders including industry and other end-users, as well as the wider public. Corporate communication also addresses reputation management and accountability. The remainder of this note focuses on public engagement **not** corporate communications/PR.

Guiding principles

7. Our public engagement activities are shaped by several overarching principles:
- to ensure that communications and public engagement are embedded in BBSRC-funded programmes and at institutes/centres, and that the researchers we fund recognise the aims of public engagement and contribute their delivery.
 - to ensure that we develop tailored public engagement strategies and delivery plans for new and major areas of funding
 - to ensure that formal BBSRC consultations, e.g. on strategy development or funding priorities in different areas of research, invite input from NGOs and other groups and individuals that can bring wider perspectives than the research and end-user communities alone
 - to publish BBSRC position statements in potentially contentious areas of science
{http://www.bbsrc.ac.uk/organisation/policies/position/public_interest/index.html }; and to monitor and address routinely any potential societal issues raised by new BBSRC research
{http://www.bbsrc.ac.uk/society/accountability/ethical_review_process.html}
 - to provide researchers with support and training around communications and public engagement (BBSRC grant holders are required to undertake some form of public engagement and report on it in their Final reports)
 - to seek synergy and 'added value' through working with partner organisations where appropriate (Examples include cross-Research Council programmes, partnerships with opinion research professionals, NGOs, science festivals/centres, specialist groups such as Understanding Animal Research, Sciencewise Expert Resource Centre and the Science Media Centre)
 - to ensure that activities are informed by input from 'target-audience', i.e. events planned around the needs/interests of the target 'public(s)'

to share best practice, and build on outputs and lessons learned from previous public engagement by BBSRC and others

to contribute to national science programmes and events that are aimed at raising public awareness and encouraging public engagement with science (e.g. Government's Science So What? Campaign).

RCUK coordinated activities

8. Through RCUK, BBSRC is supporting the national programme of Beacons for Public Engagement, where the aim is to embed engagement with research into the HEI sector. This is funded by Research Councils/Funding Councils/Wellcome Trust {www.rcuk.ac.uk/sis/beacons.htm}
9. Other areas coordinated through RCUK include: support for Continuing Professional Development for teachers around science topics; support for Nuffield Bursaries, and other award schemes for school students to undertake research; the Researchers in Residence scheme that places early career scientists in schools; and awards for researchers to undertake public engagement during National Science Week.
10. A recent example of BBSRC's work with RCUK is BBSRC's leadership of the RCUK input to Darwin 200, by producing a touring exhibition 'Darwin Today'. This is visiting 30 venues around the UK during 2009 (specifically including regions that are not traditionally well served by outreach events). It illustrates the impact of Darwin's ideas on contemporary research.
11. BBSRC is represented on the RCUK Public Engagement with Research Group, and the RCUK Communications Strategy Advisory Group.

Examples of recent and current BBSRC public engagement activities

Stem cells

12. Recognising the potential for public controversy BBSRC and MRC jointly commissioned The British Market Research Bureau (BRMB) to conduct a public dialogue on the science and issues surrounding stem cells. This was funded by Sciencewise ERC, and independently evaluated by the Institute for Science and Society, University of Nottingham. The evaluation revealed significant participant scepticism about the dialogue: many did not think that policymakers would take account of the discussions. It also concluded that the high levels of support for stem cell research noted in the dialogue report should be interpreted with caution, and warned against dialogue being treated as an exercise in gathering data on public attitudes which can in itself then be used to justify policy decisions..
13. The public dialogue involved a total of 200 members of the public who participated in workshops at five venues across Britain and interviews with fifty stakeholders from sectors including science, medicine, industry, ethics and religion. The findings were launched at a public event in December 2008, attended by the Science Minister and the CEOs of BBSRC and MRC. {http://www.bbsrc.ac.uk/society/dialogue/activities/stem_cell_final_report.pdf} BBSRC and MRC are responding to the recommendations of the report.
14. In addition BBSRC and MRC produced a touring exhibition on stem cell science that has visited public venues around the UK and provided a focus for public discussion meetings. This and associated publications, including one for school students, are being updated in Autumn 2009, and will form the

basis on continued public exhibition work in line with recommendations of the dialogue report.

Synthetic Biology

15. Led by a subgroup of BSS, BBSRC commissioned an independent study into social and ethical issues surrounding synthetic biology. The findings were published in 2008
{http://www.bbsrc.ac.uk/organisation/policies/reviews/scientific_areas/0806_synthetic_biology.pdf }.
16. In recognition of the potential for public concerns being raised, the programmes of the BBSRC/EPSRC Synthetic Biology Network centres include social/ethical elements supported by AHRC and ESRC. Network representatives have worked with BBSRC and EPSRC in aspects of communication and public engagement.
17. In 2008, Professor Alan Thorpe (RCUK CEO lead on public engagement) chaired a BBSRC-convened meeting of researchers, regulators, advisory committee members and representatives of BSS and EPSRC's Societal Issues Panel, SIP) to consider regulatory matters around synthetic biology research and applications
{http://www.bbsrc.ac.uk/society/dialogue/activities/synthetic_biology/synthetic_biology_public_statements.pdf } This was seen as an excellent engagement by key players to discuss potential issues e.g. regulation **before** they arose.
18. BBSRC and EPSRC, with funding from Sciencewise Expert Resource Centre, have commissioned the BMRB to conduct a public dialogue on synthetic biology. This dialogue will help frame the issues and promote discussion of those raised by synthetic biology research. This will help the Research Councils and others to ensure that future policies better reflect the views, concerns and aspirations of the public. The dialogue will begin shortly and is expected to run for 6-9 months.
{http://www.bbsrc.ac.uk/society/dialogue/activities/synthetic_biology/synthetic_biology_dialogue.html}
19. We are working to ensure synergy with activities and interests of others including RAEng and the Royal Society. In parallel to all of the above BBSRC is producing general information materials and news releases as appropriate.

Food security

20. We have developed, and started to deliver, a communications and public engagement strategy and work plan that includes targeted media relations, promotion of BBSRC's developing roadmap and strategic plan, sponsorship and participation of stakeholder events and exhibitions, development of a dedicated website (www.foodsecurity.ac.uk), targeted discussion meetings and public events.
21. The BSS panel is advising on aspects of public engagement and in particular how to ensure that the breadth of food security issues is not lost in narrower discussions, e.g. around GM technology. BBSRC updated its position statement on GM plant science in 2008, with advice and input from Panel members.

Sustainable Bioenergy

22. ERU is working with Research Group and research leaders at the BBSRC Sustainable Bioenergy Centre on a coordinated approach to communications and public engagement. Strategic direction will be advised by the incoming 'Bioenergy champion'. A communications team is being formed to plan and implement a programme of engagement activities from 2010. Elements of this programme are expected to include: coordinated approaches to media relations and public presentations enhanced web presence, and media and public engagement training for researchers. The BSS Panel will provide advice.

Other topics

23. We have also conducted a range of public engagement activities around nanotechnology, research into ageing and the use of animals in research. Major public exhibitions have included an interactive display on Biodiversity (with NERC) which will be on display at the World Museum Liverpool during 2010, International Year of Biodiversity.

Action

Council is invited to **DISCUSS** BBSRC's work in public engagement and its contribution to national effort.

Communications and Information Management Group
September 2009

ANNEX 1

Membership of the BBSRC Bioscience for Society Strategy Panel (with an indication of principal areas of expertise/interest)

Professor Alan Irwin (Chair) - Copenhagen Business School
(social science, science and technology policy, risk, and science public relations)

Professor Louise Archer - King's College London
(sociology of education and education policy)

Ms Wendy Barnaby – Independent
(science communication, print and broadcast journalism)

Dr David Boak - Independent
(science communication, science in society)

Professor Kenneth Boyd - University of Edinburgh
(medical and biomedical ethics, use of animals in research)

Professor Derek Burke CBE DL - Independent
(bioscience, science policy and regulation)

Professor Robert Dingwall - The University of Nottingham
(sociology of medicine and law, sociology of bioethics)

Dr Richard Dyer OBE - Biosciences Federation
(bioscience, science outreach to schools)

Sir Roland Jackson - British Science Association
(science communication, education and science in society)

Dr Brian Johnson – Independent
(impact of biotechnology, biosafety, societal implications of gene technologies)

Dr Mairi Levitt - Lancaster University
(empirical bioethics and public engagement)

Dr Tom MacMillan - Food Ethics Council
(use and governance of science relating to food and farming)

Professor Vincent Walsh - University College London
(cognitive neuroscience, use of animals in research)