

**MINUTES** of the Bioscience for Society Strategy Panel Meeting held on 29 January 2010 at the Medical Research Council, London.

Those attending:-

**Panel Members**

Professor A Irwin, Chair  
Ms W Barnaby  
Professor K Boyd  
Professor D Burke CBE  
Professor R Dingwall  
Dr B Johnson  
Dr T MacMillan  
Dr R Dyer  
Sir Roland Jackson  
Dr S Knapp  
Dr G Rowe

**BBSRC Office**

Mr P Gemmill  
Dr P Middleton  
Dr M Winstanley OBE

**Apologies**

Professor L Archer  
Professor V Walsh  
Mr S Walker

**1. Chairman's Introduction and Report**

1.1. Prof Irwin welcomed the panel to the meeting and noted that since the last meeting there had been a turnover in membership. Prof Irwin noted the excellent contributions Drs Boak and Levitt had made to the panel before welcoming new members, Dr Rowe, Dr Knapp and Mr Walker (who sent his apologies).

**2. Minutes of the meeting held on 25 September 2009**

2.1. The panel suggested the following changes to the minutes which when made would make the minutes a true record of the meeting:

- Point 6.1 misspelling of REF
- Ms Barnaby asked that the phrase, "without listening to people on the ground." is inserted into point 3.7 after, "...unlikely to be achieved"
- Dr MacMillan requested that the second sentence in point 3.2 is changed to, "He noted that the most significant factor that influences food security is wealth. Food Security is primarily an issue of consumption. Hunger..."
- Dr MacMillan also asked that, in point 3.4, the phrase, "informs learning" is replaced with, "gives food insecure people the power to influence decisions"
- In point 4.1.1 it was requested that, "public's" is changed to, "publics"

**2.2. Matters arising from the minutes**

- Dr Johnson noted that point 2.2 discussed horizon scanning as a function of BSS which would be dealt with in item 3 of the agenda.
- The panel raised the issues of training for public engagement and Sir Roland told the panel that the BIS Science for All expert group would shortly be reporting on training as part of its work.

**ACTION:** secretariat to send the report to the panel when published.

- In reference to point 5.1, Dr Johnson asked if an awareness of the Beacons for Public Engagement could be an item on the next agenda.

**ACTION:** secretariat to explore bringing a paper on the Beacons to the next meeting.

### **3. Discussion of BSS 'portfolio of issues'**

- 3.1. Prof Irwin introduced this item by reminding the panel that it is the result of an email discussion within the group around the panel's role to work proactively as well as reactively. Prof Irwin noted that there was a danger that the panel did not pick up emergent themes in a timely way. He noted that two years ago the panel agreed to focus its work on three topics areas (stem cells, synthetic biology and bioenergy, with a watching brief on GM). Prof Irwin opened this discussion to the panel with three questions: is the strategy of focussing on three topics still appropriate? If so, are the current topics still appropriate? How does the panel ensure it is open to new issues? Prof Irwin asked the panel to comment on the proposal for a longer 'horizon scanning' meeting in May and on the role of external speakers at meetings.
- 3.2. Prof Burke endorsed the inviting of external speakers and the noted the very broad expertise of the panel and the need for the panel to occasionally spend some time looking forward. He also noted that committees and panels tend to work better when they feel they owned the issues they were discussing.
- 3.3. Dr Johnson noted that at the panel hasn't spent any time discussing the issues surrounding the extremely data rich nature of modern biology and science
- 3.4. Dr MacMillan suggested that there should be an expectation of members to bring issues to the panel – he suggested that at every meeting each panel member is given the opportunity to bring items of interest to the attention of the panel. This idea was broadly endorsed.

**ACTION:** secretariat to ensure this becomes a standing agenda item.

- 3.5. Dr Johnson encouraged the panel to share more resources by email.
- 3.6. Sir Roland noted how the issues the panel were discussing had all been formed around a science and technology perspective and suggestion the framing some issues, such as food security, from a societal perspective would have value.
- 3.7. Prof Dingwall agreed with Sir Roland that societal framing of issues was important in allowing voices from society to be heard for instance the role of 'home-grown' food production versus industrial scale production.
- 3.8. Mr Gemmill noted that BBSRC would be leading a cross-Government research programme on food security which included ESRC and social science research.
- 3.9. Prof Dingwall agreed that a longer meeting in May would be of benefit and suggested starting at 11am and discussion should be informed by BBSRC's new strategic plan. This was endorsed by the panel.

**ACTION:** Secretariat to ensure May meeting starts at 11.

- 3.10. Dr Johnson commented that BSS would benefit from deeper links with the Strategy Advisory Board (SAB), for instance in sharing what SAB feel are the upcoming issues.
- 3.11. Prof Boyd noted that the concepts of natural versus unnatural may be of interest to the panel, particularly in the context of the industrial biotechnology revolution where people's perceptions can block scientific progress.
- 3.12. Dr Knapp commented that scientists tend to 'box' issues into categories when in fact the public link issues across 'boxes'.
- 3.13. Prof Dingwall reminded the panel that it will need to keep in mind how ideas fit within the context of BBSRC.

### **4. Institute Assessment Exercise – Public Engagement**

- 4.1. Dr Winstanley introduced this paper and asked the panel: (a) would they be happy to set criteria for judging? (b) can BSS act as a peer review panel? and (c) would the panel like an oral presentation from the panel?
- 4.2. Drs Gene Rowe registered conflicts of interest.
- 4.3. On a practical level the Panel agreed that the proposed format was good for assessing the institutes, that the panel could set criteria and that BSS would like to hear presentations from institutes followed by a question and answer session.
- 4.4. Talking around the assessment members raised a number of points, including; sanctions against those institutes who underperform; the tension between communication activities and public engagement activities; encouraging public engagement and ensuring it is embedded in the working of the institute; evaluation and impacts of public engagement; and the importance of recognising the value of partnerships.

## 5. BBSRC and industrial collaboration

- 5.1. Dr Winstanley introduced the paper and asked BBS to advise BBSRC on a way forward.
- 5.2. Dr MacMillan suggested BBSRC should look at similar statements from other organisations, such as the Co-operative's ethical guidelines. He, and other panel members, stressed the importance of the nature of collaborations rather than the groups being interacted with *per se*.
- 5.3. Sir Roland raised the role of RCUK in coordinating a cross-research council statement and reiterated that any statement needs to be kept broad.
- 5.4. Dr Knapp highlighted some policies of the Natural History Museum and indicated that a recent study had noted that the way to change the conduct of companies was to engage with them.
- 5.5. Many of the panel agreed that it was inappropriate to have a 'hit-list' of companies or sectors who should be excluded from collaboration and that each partnership should be assessed on a case-by-case basis.
- 5.6. There was general agreement within the panel that BBSRC needs procedures, and possibly training, in place to ensure that commercial/industrial collaborations are ethically sound. Additionally it was thought that judgements on these issues should be made by funding committees, with guidance from BBSRC office.
- 5.7. Dr Dyer noted that universities have ethical committees to assess such collaborations and institutes may benefit from similar arrangements.

**ACTION:** BBSRC to update BSS on what the procedures are in place in this area

## 6. Update on BBSRC public dialogue programme

- 6.1. Dr Middleton introduced paper and invited comments from the panel. Dr Johnson, in his role as chair of the Synthetic Biology Oversight and Steering groups, updated the panel on the dialogue, particularly noting the importance of ensuring the outputs of the dialogue become embedded in the research community.
- 6.2. Prof Burke suggested that stem cells are still a major issue for BBSRC and encouraged BBSRC office to redouble attempts to engage MRC in responding to the dialogue.
- 6.3. Dr Gemmill alerted the panel to Prof Douglas Kell's appearance before the House of Commons Science and Technology Committee, in which he discussed the synthetic biology dialogue.

## 7. UK Sport Science

- 7.1. Dr Middleton introduced this paper and Prof Irwin asked the panel to suggest any considerations specific to this area.
- 7.2. The panel noted a number of issues this call raises including:
  - Gender issues and exploitation
  - Human enhancement, i.e. exploiting science for advanced performance including military uses
  - Public concern over "GM humans"
  - Longevity issues around elite athletes
  - The relationships between 'sport for all' and sports for professionals
  - The 'sciencification' of sport – is it a good thing?
  - Ethics of human experimentation
- 7.3. Dr MacMillan noted that this issue does in some way link to the earlier paper on the appropriateness of collaborations.
- 7.4. The panel were in agreement that in order for BSS to be able to provide advice on such calls it needs to be involved much earlier in the process of setting up funding calls.

## 8. Any other business

### NETWORKS IN SYNTHETIC BIOLOGY

- 8.1. BSS had been asked to assess the public engagement and social science aspects of the Networks in Synthetic Biology's first year reports.
- 8.2. Professor Dingwall made a declaration of interest.
- 8.3. With the exception of the Edinburgh network, the panel were generally rather disappointed with the quality of the reports. Many networks seem to have conflated public engagement and social

science activity. Some panel members suggested that one or two of the networks appeared to employ the deficit model to their public engagement activities.

- 8.4. The panel recognised that this was the Networks' first year and encouraged constructive feedback the sharing of practices across the networks.

**ACTION:** BBSRC office to collate emailed comments and circulate to BSS for further comment and approval.