

## **EVALUATION OF BBSRC'S ANIMAL SCIENCES COMMITTEE RESPONSIVE MODE PORTFOLIO 2006**

### **BBSRC RESPONSE TO THE PANEL'S REPORT**

This document sets out BBSRC's response to the findings of the Review Panel convened to provide an independent scientific evaluation of the research supported in responsive mode through BBSRC's Animal Sciences Committee (ASC) since the Committee's inception in 1994.

BBSRC would first of all like to thank the Panel members for their hard work and commitment to this exercise. We are delighted to note the Panel's conclusion that 'the ASC is working very well, and fulfilling its aim to support high quality basic and strategic research on animal function'. The remainder of this document sets out our response to the Panel's recommendations.

### **RESEARCH QUALITY AND RESEARCH OUTPUTS**

Recommendation 1: BBSRC's support for animal sciences research in the UK is vital, and should be continued.

BBSRC is committed to continuing its support for responsive mode across the Council's remit, including animal sciences, and the Council has pledged to increase support for research funded through responsive mode by 4% per annum until 2007/08.

Recommendation 2: BBSRC's efforts to manage demand are commendable. However, the Council should take further steps to address the burden that the current success rate places on the community.

This issue is discussed regularly with bioscience researchers at BBSRC 'roadshow' events around the country, and at our Committees and Panels, which include members of the scientific community. We continually seek ways to manage demand for funding and to reduce the burden on the community. The subject is also regularly discussed at our meetings with the heads of bioscience departments.

Recommendation 3: BBSRC should continue to strive to identify ways in which it can contribute to improving job security, benefits and career prospects for research staff.

We agree that these are serious issues that must be addressed. Research Councils UK (RCUK) leads for the Research Councils in this area. Activities include the current work to revise the 1996 Concordat for contract research staff career development and replace it with a Code of Practice; developing a new web-based careers resource for postdoctoral researchers and PhD students; and providing Academic Fellowships, which aim to create a clearer pathway into academic research.

In addition, BBSRC is developing a broad Human Resources Strategy for BBSRC, which will cover the responsibilities of PIs in Universities to the staff funded on

BBSRC grants. We also hold an annual 'Next Generation' conference which aims to inform our PhD students and postdocs of the broad range of research careers open to them - both inside and beyond academia.

## **BALANCE AND COVERAGE OF THE PORTFOLIO**

Recommendation 4: The ASC's current remit and themes are appropriate and should not be significantly changed. BBSRC should review the way in which the ASC themes are presented on its website to ensure that they read consistently.

We are pleased to note that the current remit and themes are appropriate. We will review the way that the themes are presented on our website and revise the text where necessary to ensure that ASC's themes are presented clearly and consistently.

Recommendation 5: BBSRC should investigate the Wellcome Trust's recent experience with its move to sub-Committees to inform the discussion on Committee remits.

BBSRC regularly reviews its Research Committee structure, and monitors related developments in similar funding organisations. We have also recently launched a public consultation on our Committee structure<sup>1</sup>. The Panel's views will inform future discussions.

Recommendation 6: BBSRC should consider its current provision of support in mammalian endocrinology, foetal programming and Functional Magnetic Resonance Imaging (fMRI).

The ASC is currently revising its Priority Areas, and has taken account of the Panel's comments.

Recommendation 7: Priority Areas have an important role in enabling the Committee to promote particular areas of science, but should not be prioritised to the detriment of support for high quality research outside Priority Areas. BBSRC should provide the community with a clear statement on the role of Priority Areas in encouraging particular areas of science, and on the way in which they are used in grant appraisal.

Priority areas represent focused areas where BBSRC wishes to encourage more applications. They are used to help the community respond to changes in requirements for animal sciences research and skills. However, quality of science remains the key criterion for BBSRC funding, and BBSRC continues to welcome responsive mode applications across its full remit. This message will be reinforced in future communications with the research community. The Panel's recommendation on the relative priority afforded to Priority Areas will be taken forward as appropriate by Chairs of the Research Committees.

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<sup>1</sup> [http://www.bbsrc.ac.uk/media/pressreleases/06\\_06\\_06\\_committees.html](http://www.bbsrc.ac.uk/media/pressreleases/06_06_06_committees.html)

Recommendation 8: BBSRC should continue to encourage interdisciplinary research where it is appropriate, in particular investigating ways to improve the appraisal process and success rate for interdisciplinary research.

We continuously seek ways to encourage high quality interdisciplinary research, and work closely with our sister Research Councils to achieve this. One example is our support for Systems Biology, where we moved quickly to support the development of multidisciplinary centres of excellence for Systems Biology research. In addition, all of the Research Councils are currently reviewing barriers to interdisciplinarity in preparation for the next Government Comprehensive Spending Review in 2007. However, we also recognise that this is not completely within our control, and that the move to interdisciplinary research will require a culture shift (for example in training) within both universities and funding agencies.

## **INTERACTION WITH INDUSTRY**

Recommendation 9: BBSRC should continue to think creatively about how to promote interaction and collaboration between academia and industry, including improving networking and communication of opportunities, and identifying ways to encourage industry to invest in grants.

Encouraging interaction between research and industry is a key priority for BBSRC, and we recently pledged to double the amount that we invest in collaborative grants by 2007/08. Our Bioscience for Industry Strategy Panel regularly reviews BBSRC's support in this area and identifies ways in which BBSRC can make a difference in this field. BBSRC has, for example, taken the lead in supporting the development of innovative Capacity Building Awards in Integrative Mammalian Biology, jointly with the Medical Research Council, the English and Scottish Funding Councils, the Department of Trade and Industry, and a pharmaceutical industry consortium. These awards will boost research and teaching capacity in *in vivo* physiology and pharmacology. Similarly, wider promotion of Industrial Partnership Awards is increasing the number and quality of grant applications with an industrial contribution.

## **PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT**

Recommendation 10: BBSRC should continue its efforts to encourage and assist scientists to engage with the public, in particular by promoting its facilities and increasing its provision of training.

We welcome the Panel's finding that the level of involvement in public engagement activities reported by animal sciences grantholders is very good, and note the Panel's encouragement to continue efforts to assist scientists to engage with the public.

## **THREATS TO ANIMAL SCIENCE RESEARCH IN THE UK**

Recommendation 11: BBSRC should reconsider its position on the resubmission of grant applications to help to ease the burden on the community, to increase the quality of the applications funded, and to reduce the wastage of scientific ideas.

BBSRC recognises that this is a complex issue for both the Council and the community, and one which needs further discussion and clarification. The outcomes of future responsive mode Portfolio Evaluations will also contribute to the discussion.

Recommendation 12: BBSRC should consider ways in which the concerns of grantholders relating to animal research could be presented to the Home Office and universities.

BBSRC and the Home Office are observers on the Biosciences Federation Animal Sciences Group, which provides a useful and effective forum for these discussions. BBSRC will consider ways to encourage communication of grantholders' concerns to the Group, and ways in which to increase awareness amongst grantholders of the Group's activities. It may in some cases be most appropriate for grantholders to raise issues via their learned societies and professional bodies. As these organisations are represented on the Animal Sciences Group, BBSRC will also be party to those discussions. In addition, BBSRC liaises with the Office of Science and Innovation (OSI) about issues relating to the use of animals in research. OSI can also facilitate cross-departmental communication when required.

Recommendation 13: BBSRC should consider ways in which longer term support for animal research facilities could be provided.

BBSRC provides long term support for UK animal research facilities at the Babraham Institute, the Institute of Animal Health and the Roslin Institute. Responsibility for supporting animal research facilities at universities rests with the UK Funding Councils, with whom we maintain constructive dialogue.