

Case Study

Openness in animal research

A public dialogue on openness and transparency in animal research

Vital statistics

Commissioning body:

Medical Research Council (MRC)

Duration of process:

13 months: April 2013 – May 2014

Total public participants involved:

48

Total stakeholders involved:

32 in the Oversight Group, workshop, Working Group and Steering Group

Total specialists involved in events:

1 stakeholder at each of the first set of events, plus video input from the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine (LSHTM), the Association of Medical Research Charities (AMRC) and the British Union for the Abolition of Vivisection (BUAV).

Cost of project: £74,575 total,

Sciencewise co-funding = £36,125

In 2012, a poll on public attitudes to animal research showed a small, but significant (7-10%), decline in the public acceptability of animal research in medicine. This is a change from the upward trend in the acceptability of animal research seen over the previous 10 years.

Support for the use of animals in research is a key 'licence to operate' issue for public and private research organisations in the life sciences sector. In addition, the sector is a key part of the Government's economic growth agenda. Therefore, the sector wished to address the reduction in public support.

In October 2012, a process was established to develop a Concordat on Openness on Animal Research. The Concordat process brought together 40 of the major players in the life sciences sector to develop principles that committed them to a more transparent approach to the use of animals in research. As part of the process, a public dialogue was established so that the Concordat reflected the issues of greatest interest to the public.

Policy maker view

“ The dialogue is helping to ensure that the Concordat is aligned with public views, and it also adds credibility too ”

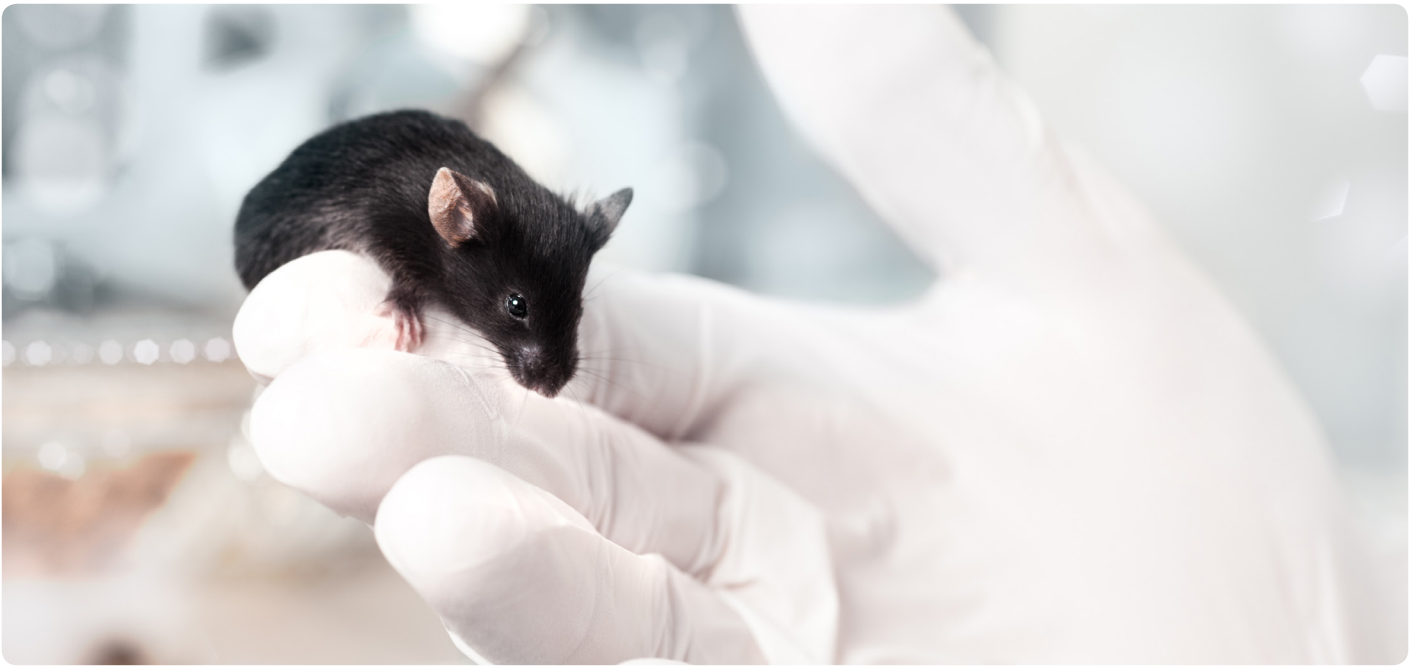
Concordat Working Group member

“ The dialogue has backed up what we already had in the evolving Concordat: being more open, explaining what research is being done and why, and using images more ”

Concordat Working Group member

Influence on policy and policy makers

The Concordat was launched on 14 May 2014 with 72 signatories, substantially more than the 40 originally involved. The main impact of the dialogue has been to provide solid reassurance that the Concordat is, indeed, in line with public views. There have also been some small, but real, changes to the Concordat and the associated guidance document. In particular, the citation of the dialogue and the exploration of the specific things that public participants raised as being important. These included publishing



Background

Public views on animal research have been monitored since 1999 through surveys carried out by Ipsos MORI, and previous dialogues have explored connected issues. However, there had been no previous attempt to directly explore what research organisations would need to do to be ‘transparent and accountable’ in the eyes of the public.

A number of the key stakeholders of the Concordat process – the Medical Research Council (MRC), the Biotechnology and Biological Sciences Research Council (BBSRC), the Wellcome Trust and Understanding Animal Research (UAR) – decided that a public dialogue with a series of deliberative workshops should be funded to explore public views. The public’s views were to feed into the drafting of the Concordat public consultation documents and to inform the Concordat members of the more in-depth views and values of the public.

details of how many animals are used and why, the use of images and films, and the need to demonstrate that efforts are made to ensure research is not duplicated. The dialogue findings were also used to defend against potential dilutions of Concordat commitments as they evolved – for example, to use images in communications, and to allow access to laboratories.

As well as influencing the concordat, the dialogue findings are being used in conversations with scientists about why the public want to see more openness, and what they want more information about. In particular, how genetics technology is used in science and what the motivations of researchers are.

“It helps us when we talk to our members, so we have more robust evidence about what the public think.”

Dialogue project Oversight Group (OG) member.

In addition to these immediate impacts, key messages about regulation – which fall outside the Concordat signatories remit – were passed to the Home Office as the responsible authority.

Key messages from the participants:

Overall, participants in this dialogue were keen that the sector should be open and welcomed its aim to be more transparent. They understood that the reasons for a lack of transparency were possibly historical and recognised there was an inherent difficulty of communicating about a sector which involves animal suffering.

However, dialogue participants concluded that, if the public are to believe that the sector is genuinely committed to openness, there are several key principles the sector must adhere to:

1. Clear messaging from the sector as to why openness is important. If the public do not know why the sector wants to be more open now, they will suspect either that the sector just wants to simulate openness for public relations purposes or that it is communicating with the public because of some behaviour it is encouraging the public to adopt (for instance, choosing different medication or refusing to buy products tested on animals).
2. The sector should demonstrate its commitment to openness by creating greater scrutiny of itself. This scrutiny should be done by independent eyes and the results should be made available to the public. Other communications efforts, if done without scrutiny, may not be seen as genuine efforts to be open.

3. The dialogue revealed a number of nuanced arguments that exist about the harms and benefits of animal research. Participants felt that the public need to be educated about these nuances to be able to weigh up the harm and benefits of animal research. This would involve the sector being clear about the 3Rs (replace, reduce, refine); the harms and benefits of animal research; and presenting a lot more accurate and unbiased information about what actually happens to animals before, during and after procedures.

Participants also highlighted that different publics are likely to need different communication approaches.

The dialogue activities

The overall objective of the public dialogue was to understand public opinion on what should be considered 'openness' and 'transparency' on animal research. These could then feed directly into the Concordat process to develop principles and objectives that align with public expectations.

Specific objectives of the public dialogue included:

- To understand public expectations of openness and transparency around the use of animals in research
- To explore what information the public want to receive on the use of animals in research, and how it should be communicated to support greater openness and transparency, including, for example, information on how research is regulated
- To identify aspects of current practice by the bioscience sector that are considered secretive or hidden, understanding why this is, and what would need to change to be considered open and transparent
- To consider what future work could be done to address openness and transparency issues for the life science sector in the future

The public dialogue was managed by UAR which also led the work on developing the Concordat on openness on animal research. UAR established an Oversight Group (OG) to help steer and oversee the public dialogue process. The OG comprised BBSRC, the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS), MRC, the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (RSPCA), Sciencewise and UAR (which chaired the OG).

The public dialogue was organised as two reconvened events in each of three locations (Manchester, London and Cardiff). Each event lasted a full day and was attended by between 15 and 18 people (48 public participants in total), with a mixture of ages, gender and ethnicity broadly representative of each location.

The first events focused on providing participants with background information on the what, why and who of animal research; facts and figures; and the range of views that existed about animal suffering and the benefits of animal research. Participants discussed the issues in small groups and in plenary sessions. Additional expert advice and information was provided by staff from the RSPCA's scientific welfare team.

Between events, participants were asked to complete one of two tasks – to conduct independent research into animal research, or interview a friend or family member.

At the start of the second event, participants fed back what they had learned and what pieces of information from this exercise they felt were most useful. They then went on to watch a number of videos before debating future potential ideas on transparency:

- Videos showing opinions on the challenges for openness and transparency in the sector – with views from the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine (LSHTM), the Association of Medical Research Charities (AMRC) and the British Union for the Abolition of Vivisection (BUAV)
- Training videos of some mild procedures, and care and handling of animals
- A video provided by BUAV showing undercover footage taken of animal researchers and some written slides drawing attention to bad practice

To ensure that the information presented to the participants and the framing of the topic would stand up to external scrutiny as being as reasonable and unbiased as possible, a wider range of stakeholders gave input to the information and commented on drafts of materials. This involved a small facilitated workshop with seven external stakeholders and UAR, and telephone and face-to-face discussions. As well as providing insight into the extent to which the sector is open and transparent, feedback from this stage was used to inform development of the stimulus materials and other information presented to participants during the dialogue. The materials for the public dialogue events were reviewed and amended in light of the stakeholder input until a broad consensus was reached among the OG on the information that would be presented during the workshops.

What worked especially well

Clear, simple and unambiguous objectives were essential for effective delivery.

The independent evaluators found that all four of the objectives of this dialogue were very well met or well met. The evaluators attributed this, in part, to the clarity, simplicity and 'understandability' of all four objectives. The objectives avoided using jargon or conceptual language and were very specific. The evaluators observed a notable absence of disagreement over what the objectives meant and why they were needed, which greatly aided implementation of the dialogue.

Active participation from diverse interests was essential on the OG.

The OG functioned effectively as the executive body for the dialogue, taking major decisions on the go-ahead for locations of workshops, numbers of participants, dialogue design and dialogue materials. Therefore, its composition was critical and comprised the UAR, RSPCA, MRC, BBSRC, BIS and Sciencewise. Of particular importance here is the role of the RSPCA as it was the only organisation representing the perspective of animal welfare specifically. Therefore, it had a great responsibility in the dialogue to provide 'balance' on the OG. The RSPCA took this responsibility very seriously and was very effective in influencing the dialogue. It is entirely possible that the credibility of the dialogue would have evaporated had the RSPCA not played such an active and influential role, and if the other OG members had not respected its input so consistently.

It took around six to eight weeks to develop stimulus materials on such a contentious topic.

This dialogue followed a very robust and effective process to develop the stimulus materials, led by the delivery contractor. Firstly, a stakeholder workshop was held to solicit feedback on materials and discuss potential information sources, then a first draft of materials was developed by the facilitators. This was followed by various stages of commenting by the OG and wider stakeholder group before the OG finally signed off the materials consensually. This process was initially planned to be around two to three weeks long, but ultimately took around six weeks. This caused the delay of the public events and an extension to the project duration. It is important to note, though, that even this extended period of six weeks was characterised by meetings organised at short notice, commenting deadlines of 24 – 48 hours long, and OG members commenting in between other meetings and commitments. It is likely that six to eight weeks is a minimum to develop materials on such a contentious topic where the balance and ownership of the materials is essential.

What worked less well

It took well over six months for the public dialogue on such a contentious topic to go from approval of funding to publication of the final report.

Funding was approved and Invitations to Tender were issued in April 2013. The dialogue report was published in November 2013. At nearly all times, the project was operating at full speed. In part, the amount of time was a function of the administrative process for procurement. However, more importantly, the sensitivity of the topic meant that consensus within the OG simply took a long time to reach on most decisions (although it was absolutely essential). Although the dialogue was completed in seven months, it is fair to say that it did run significant risks and significantly strained the individuals involved at times.

“ We got there in the end! I’m relieved that the events went well and we have the findings. ”

Oversight Group member.

Objective ways of calibrating key participant views would have strengthened results.

The majority of any dialogue event is rightly about building participants’ knowledge, and exploring viewpoints in an open and qualitative way. However, the independent evaluators suggested that there are times when capturing participants’ views in objective and calibrated ways could make the dialogue outputs more robust. For example, if an idea appears to have support because a few participants have voiced it (such as support for CCTV in animal research laboratories), others have nodded and the remaining participants have not disagreed, then what level of confidence can there be that the idea is supported by group members? Are the quiet participants agreeing or disagreeing? How strongly do even the vocal participants agree or disagree? While the facilitated conversation may bring some of these points out, it would give greater confidence to the results if views were captured in a more objective way – for example by a show of hands. This would reduce the risk of over representation of the articulate participants’ views as well as reducing the risk of results becoming over simplified during the reporting process.

Contact Details

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Reports

Full project and evaluation reports available from Sciencewise on www.sciencewise-erc.org.uk/cms/openness-in-animal-research-dialogue/