

How to be an AWERB champion – report of a workshop at IAT Congress 2017

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Introduction

The workshop aimed to provide Animal Technologists with information and advice:

- To assist them in becoming more involved in the Animal Welfare and Ethical Review Body (AWERB) at their establishment; and
- To provide encouragement for them to become local AWERB 'champions'.

It was run twice during Congress 2017 and this paper is a summary of both sessions combined. The workshops began with a presentation from Penny Hawkins (PH) explaining why there is a need for people to champion their AWERB and what this means in practice. This was followed by an Animal Technologists's perspective on being an AWERB champion, presented by Tania Boden (TB) in the first workshop and Jolene Hammonds (JH) in the second. The workshops concluded with turning point voting and breakout discussion sessions.

Over the two workshops, 49 Animal Technologists attended; 37 from universities or research institutes, 4 from industry and 8 from other facility types including breeding establishments. They were asked to select all of the roles that applied to them, from a list including the roles of Animal Technologist (selected by 32 participants), Named Animal Care and Welfare Officer (NACWO 19), Named Training and Competency Officer (NCO 8), Named Information Officer (NIO 3), Establishment Licence Holder (ELH 1), scientist (4) and Named Veterinary Surgeon (NVS 0). Just under half of the participants were AWERB members; of these; nine people had been members for up to one year, nine for between 1 and 5 years and five for over 5 years (two for more than 10).

Why do AWERBs need champions?

Many AWERBs are well supported, work effectively to

address all of their tasks and contribute significantly to improving science, animal (and staff) welfare and the establishment's culture of care. Unfortunately, however, this is not always the case and problems can arise. For example, there may be a general lack of awareness of and support for the AWERB and its role within the establishment. The focus may be on the project licence review function and less time may be allocated for the other tasks all of which are important (see the Animals in Science Regulation Unit (ASRU) Guidance on the Animals (Scientific Procedures) Act 1986 (ASPAs) and the RSPCA/LASA *Guiding Principles on good practice for AWERBs* for a full task list).^{1,2} Some AWERBs are predominantly reactive, responding to issues as they arise, rather than looking at the 'bigger picture' or proactively bringing in new information (e.g. on animal welfare or the Three Rs). Communication – both by and to the AWERB – may be poor; there may be little engagement with staff, especially scientists and both resources and authority may be lacking.

There are several bodies and individuals that ought to address these kinds of issues if they arise. The Home Office ASRU sets out its expectations of the AWERB in its *Guidance on the ASPAs* and in Standard Condition 6 of the Establishment Licence.¹ The local Home Office Inspector can attend AWERB meetings as an observer and should recognise if the AWERB is not operating effectively, as should both the Establishment Licence Holder, whom the AWERB advises and the AWERB chair. The AWERB itself should review its own performance periodically but even so it may be unaware that it is not operating to good practice guidelines and fulfilling its expectations.

Given the specific expertise and individual perspectives of Animal Technologists, there is a great deal that they can do to help ensure any problems are recognised and

tackled and to 'champion' their AWERB, even if they are not actually AWERB members.

So what can I do?

- First and foremost it is important to be confident that you know who is on the AWERB, how it operates and what its full range of tasks comprises.
- Once you are fully informed regarding the AWERB's role and tasks, you can speak up if you feel they are not adequately implemented. For example, if new information about refinement does not seem to be getting through to the AWERB, you might want to raise this.
- More positively, you can pass on useful information on the 3Rs, animal welfare or ethical issues to the AWERB. This should help to shape local values and contribute a wider range of perspectives.
- And, since many Animal Technologists work closely with scientists, you are ideally placed to help improve the way scientists see the AWERB and to encourage them to be more involved themselves.

But how to go about it?

The Home Office requires that one or more NACWOs be a member of the AWERB, so the NACWO should be a good source of information with respect to who sits on the AWERB and the tasks it has to undertake. The NACWO and NIO should both be able to point you in the direction of other useful resources such as the RSPCA/LASA *Guiding principles on good practice for AWERBs*.² Your NACWO and the NVS (who should also be a member), should both provide a good route to channel comments, criticisms, positive feedback and ideas to the AWERB.

Within an establishment there are often other bodies that feed into the AWERB (such as species-specific user groups, refinement groups or project focussed groups) and sitting on these provides a good opportunity for input.

Just looking out for and supporting the AWERB's initiatives (such as holding open meetings or organising seminars on the 3Rs topics) is enormously helpful. However, the Home Office encourages Establishment Licence Holders to widen AWERB membership beyond the legal minimum, so it may be worth asking if you could become a member yourself, or at least sit in on AWERB meetings albeit without 'official' membership. Enthusiastic volunteers are often very welcome!

For more information on how to become involved with your AWERB, see reference [3].

Viewpoint from an experienced AWERB member

TB set out her observations on 'must haves' for a

successful and empowered AWERB. It is especially important that AWERB meetings are inclusive, open and honest, so that everyone can be heard and that constructive feedback is given to project licence applicants and others whose work is affected or overseen by the AWERB. This is greatly helped if there is an effective and authoritative chair who is experienced in running AWERB meetings and will encourage all members to speak, taking account of their views (or is able to access training to help acquire the necessary skills).

When taking issues that require operational solutions to the AWERB, e.g. relating to training, competency or resource, it is important to never just present the problem. Always think about solutions that may help generate discussion and lead to practical solutions. Ideally, lower-level disagreements should not be taken to the AWERB but dealt with as they occur, although it is helpful to report any positive outcomes (e.g. adaptations to welfare assessment sheets or extra observations) to the AWERB.

As an example, some discrepancies were found in proposed actual severity scores when annual returns were generated. It appeared that the personal licence holder had simply recorded the *prospective score* without really thinking about the animal's *whole life experience*. Further discussions confirmed that personal licensees did not always review the day to day welfare assessment outcomes and use these to gain a more accurate assessment of the animals' experiences. As a result, project licence holders were asked to check in with personal licence holders once a procedure was completed. They were asked to discuss the welfare assessment sheets with them and check these with the NACWO before submission of the retrospective review reports and annual returns. The whole process, including the solution, was reported to the AWERB.

This is a good example of members of the AWERB, including named persons and project and personal licence holders, working together to improve both animal welfare and establishment culture.

Viewpoint from a new AWERB member

JH shared her perceptions of the AWERB as a relatively new member and set out her own plans for becoming an AWERB champion within her establishment.

It is important to recognise that the AWERB should be inclusive of all members' views and recognise the Animal Technologist's perspective as a very valuable one. All participants should feel confident to ask questions and raise any ethical or animal welfare concerns they may have.

It is clear that reviewing project licence applications is an important task for the AWERB, as is providing advice and guidance on application of the 3Rs but other tasks are also essential including providing the scope and platform to have wider ethical discussions, for example via the ‘forum for ethical discussion’ function. This relates not only to consideration of the ethical issues within project licences but also to engaging the wider scientific community in considering ‘the bigger picture’.

A lot of project licence applications seem to use the phrase ‘this is the method used by other groups’ but it is not always clear whether and how well these groups communicate to identify refinements. The AWERB could encourage researchers to set up more platforms to share ways of reducing suffering and improving welfare.

AWERBs could also benefit from having an update from Animal Technologists as a regular item on the agenda, to help us bring our new ideas (especially relating to animal welfare) to the committee. These could include information picked up from lectures or meetings, or vital knowledge gathered in-house such as: behaviours with positive or negative implications noticed in the animal house; reports on post-surgery refinements and recovery; observations of nest building, social behaviour and enrichment preferences between different strains; and issues with mortality. These could be presented by Animal Technologists at AWERB meetings, in sub-group meetings, or by way of an Animal Technologists’ newsletter. So, even if you are a less experienced member (or not a member at all), there are many ways you can be a champion of your AWERB.

Discussion sessions

We asked participants four questions:

1. How well they felt their AWERBs were addressing all of their tasks, including those that involve ‘putting the ethics in’?
2. How they felt researchers viewed the AWERB?
3. What they would like to tell researchers?
4. How well supported they felt when they raised issues with the AWERB?

The results of the turning point voting and subsequent discussions are set out below with some action points to help address the issues raised.

(i) Does your AWERB address all of its tasks?

In general, participants felt that their AWERBs were doing well with respect to addressing all of their tasks. Those that received relatively fewer votes were: (a) providing a forum for discussion and development of ethical advice to the ELH; (b) advising on rehoming, including socialisation; (c) helping to promote a ‘culture of care’, within the establishment and, as appropriate, in the wider community; and (d) establishing and

reviewing management and operational processes for monitoring, reporting and follow up in relation to animal welfare. This does not mean that the establishments in question were not implementing these tasks; the question related to *how the AWERB contributed towards achieving them*.

Although the ‘forum for discussion’ function received fewer votes, participants believed that their AWERBs raised ethical issues within project licence review and that ethical considerations and discussions were included in other tasks, especially retrospective review. This led us to consider some of the recommendations in the recent RSPCA/LASA/LAVA/IAT/ESRC/University of Nottingham booklet on the ‘forum for discussion’ task.⁴ Many felt that the AWERBs were addressing a number of the action points recommended in this booklet, e.g. ‘scientists present their work, including wider ethical aspects, to the AWERB’; ‘time is made for ethical discussion (e.g. by delegating some tasks to subcommittees)’; and ‘a strong chair is in place who creates an atmosphere of trust, enabling challenging issues to be raised’. Fewer people felt that their AWERBs were implementing the booklet’s recommendations that ‘AWERB meetings should be open to all staff’; or that ‘regional discussions are initiated about institutional approaches to openness (e.g. via the ASC Hub network)’.⁵

Action points

You can use the NACWO, NVS, ELH, lay/independent member or AWERB Chair as a channel to:

- Ask your AWERB to reflect on how well all of the required tasks are being implemented, surveying other members of staff (e.g. Animal Technologists, scientists, the NVS, management) if necessary.
- Bring the ‘forum for discussion’ booklet⁴ to the AWERB’s attention (perhaps by asking the AWERB’s administrator to circulate it to members as an item for discussion on a meeting agenda) and ask whether its recommendations could be implemented.
- Actively report any relevant initiatives or information to the AWERB, such as culture of care-related activities, or advice that named persons have given to researchers or other staff.
- Suggest satellite meetings or subcommittees to allow for discussion of ethical issues and to implement other tasks that may not currently receive sufficient priority.
- Consider becoming more involved with your AWERB even if you are not a member – ask for minutes and comment on them, ask to sit in on meetings, ask for information about the outcomes of decisions.

(ii) How do scientists view the AWERB?

How participants believed the scientists at their facilities viewed the AWERB is set out in Table 1. The

options provided were taken from a workshop for scientists on ‘embracing ethical review’ held at a Society for Experimental Biology meeting on the 3Rs in 2016. Participants were allowed to tick as many boxes as they felt applied.

A useful sounding board to help plan projects and get them ready for the Home Office.	24
It can be helpful sometimes.	24
As a hoop/hurdle/pain!	23
The AWERB should not be ‘judging’ their projects.	15
An essential asset to help them conduct humane science.	15
It lacks essential expertise.	7

Table 1. Participants’ perceptions on how scientists view their AWERB.

People reported a fairly even split between perceiving that, on the one hand, scientists appreciated the contribution that the AWERB can make to better science and welfare and on the other, that they felt some frustration with it. It would be helpful for the AWERB to give scientists the opportunity to explain how they actually feel about their AWERB and to see whether they are aware of the benefits to their science and the welfare of the animals they use.

(iii) What would you like to tell researchers?

We asked: In addition to knowing about their science, what other skills and expertise would you like scientists to have? What do you wish they knew and what would you like to tell them? Some example quotes are listed in box 1 and most responses related to one of the following key themes:

- Wanting better, two-way communication between researchers and Animal Technologists.
- Wishing that researchers in general had increased fundamental awareness of animals’ biology, behaviour and welfare needs; and
- Wanting researchers to have a greater understanding of the Animal Technologist’s role, with a willingness to engage and include them in the research process for the benefit of animals and science.

Box 1

Some quotes from the session on ‘what would you like to tell researchers?’ include:

- “The AW(ER)B is here to help you, and so are we.”
- “We wish you knew more about our role and what it is like to do our jobs.”
- “We want to know about your science (including updates) and the impact we can have on your work.”
- “Spend more time engaging and communicating with us.”
- “We really appreciate it when scientists know about the behaviour, biology and welfare needs of their study species.”
- “We are experts too!”

Action points

- Aim to engage with scientists at your establishment, if communication is a problem. Many are supportive of the AWERB and may be able to help you to influence their colleagues! A recent paper on *Communicating the culture of care* has useful tips for Animal Technologists who want to develop their relationships with researchers.⁶
- If you feel that researchers could know more about the biology and welfare needs of their study species, or about your role, suggest (to the ELH or AWERB) that Animal Technologists and/or named persons present a talk, or run a discussion forum or workshop, on the topic.
- If you feel that relations and understanding between scientists and the AWERB could be improved, suggest that the AWERB gives researchers the opportunity to express their views and concerns, e.g. via a survey.

(iv) Encouragement, support and training

Around three-quarters of the participants felt supported and encouraged by their AWERBs when they participated in discussions during AWERB meetings. When asked whether the AWERB was supportive if they wanted to raise a concern, wanted an issue discussed or wanted to pass on some information, almost half said ‘yes’, just two said ‘no’ and the remainder ticked ‘it depends’ or had never tried this.

It was also pointed out that Animal Technologists can in turn support lay or independent members, if they are nervous about asking questions (or about dealing with the answers). For more discussion of good working relationships between lay members and animal technologists, see reference [7].

Of the 42 people who responded when asked whether AWERB membership was part of their Personal Development Plan (PDP), 17 said ‘yes’, 18 ‘no’ and the remaining seven did not have a PDP. Having a PDP that includes AWERB membership is particularly important in succession planning for NACWOs, ensuring that

there is adequate and continuous NACWO support with respect to both the role's statutory duties under the ASPA and NACWO input into the AWERB.

Few people had received adequate induction into their AWERB (3 of the 22 who responded). When asked to choose which skills or competencies for AWERB members they would appreciate training in, all of the following were popular options:

- the role and tasks of the AWERB
- 'soft skills', e.g. making points constructively dealing with opposing views, listening skills
- identifying animal welfare issues and addressing harms
- practical ethics

Participants also said they would like training in 'reviewing the science' but when this was discussed further, it was clear that the Animal Technologists present did not feel it was their role to *review* the science, and we had asked the wrong question. What participants wanted was *induction in the science conducted at the facility* (e.g. key research directions, approaches and interests). They felt that this would help set the context for the rest of the AWERB's work and their own roles as animal technologists, caring for the animals used in the research.

When asked what kind of training would be useful, the most popular choice was discussion workshops, although other options were also well supported, i.e. taught courses; swaps with members of other establishment's AWERBs; online training; and more meetings like the RSPCA/LASA/LAVA/IAT AWERB-UK events⁸ and the RSPCA Lay Members' Forum. Courses that people had already done included IAT modules (33 people), Home Office modules (37), other (non-HO module) courses by trainers e.g. Learning Curve, Red Kite, Charles River (27) and College of Laboratory Animal Science and Technology (CLAST) courses (4).

Action points

- If you do not feel supported when you contribute to the AWERB (or its associated groups), discuss this with the chair, your line manager, or a senior member of staff such as the NACWO.
- Ask for AWERB membership to be included in your personal development plan and if you do not have one, talk to your NTCO to help you develop one.
- If your facility does not have an induction programme for AWERB members, raise the issue with the chair or ELH (or ask the NACWO/NVS to do this), using the RSPCA/LASA guidance on developing induction programmes for AWERB members.⁹
- Tell the IAT about any unmet training needs that would help you to be an effective AWERB member – and champion!

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References

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