

NEW REPORT REVEALS PUBLIC'S VIEWS ON SYNTHETIC BIOLOGY

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A major new public dialogue activity on the public's views and attitudes on synthetic biology has revealed that most people are supportive of the research but with conditions on how and why it is conducted. Synthetic biology seeks to apply the principles of engineering design to biological systems and processes. Scientists believe that it may lead to new applications, such as novel systems for energy and chemicals production, medical therapies, biological computers and innovative ways to clean up hazardous waste. The findings were published on 14 June at an event in London to launch the report of Synthetic Biology Public Dialogue. The Dialogue process began late last year and included workshops with the public and interviews with interested parties.

HIGHLIGHTS OF THE FINDINGS INCLUDE:

- The public see significant opportunities from the application of synthetic biology and hope that it could help society to address major challenges such as climate change, energy security and serious diseases.
- There is uncertainty about what synthetic biology will lead to and where it is going. There are also concerns that it may be progressing too quickly

when the long-term impacts are unknown.

- The public are keen to see effective international regulation and control of synthetic biology, particularly concerning the uncontrolled release of synthetic organisms into the environment.
- The motivation of scientists in this field is important. The public are concerned that curiosity-driven researchers may proceed too quickly and they must consider the wider implications of their work.
- The Research Councils were also seen to have a clear role in developing the capabilities for scientists to think through their responsibilities in this new area of research

The Synthetic Biology Public Dialogue was commissioned and funded by the two UK Research Councils responsible for funding and strategy for synthetic biology - the Biotechnology and Biological Sciences Research Council (BBSRC) and the Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council (EPSRC) - with support from Sciencewise Expert Resource Centre. The Dialogue report will now be considered by the two Research Councils who will include its findings in their strategic planning on future funding and policy around

synthetic biology. As synthetic biology is in its early stages it will be important to ensure scientists have continued dialogue with the public to make sure its development reflects wider public concerns and aspirations.

Professor Douglas Kell, BBSRC Chief Executive, said: "We fund research that has the potential to bring significant benefits to everyone's quality of life. Biological products and processes are at the very heart of our existence, and have been so since ancient times. Synthetic biology is one of many promising areas of modern biology in which research has the potential for massive economic and social benefits. However, we must and shall not lose sight of the wider implications of our science, including in potentially controversial areas such as synthetic biology. Talking to the public about their hopes, concerns and aspirations gives us an opportunity to ensure that our science strategies do not diverge from what society thinks. I hope this dialogue will be the start of an ongoing conversation around synthetic biology"

Professor Dave Delpy, EPSRC Chief Executive, said: "Synthetic biology has made considerable advances in recent years and could offer solutions to some of the big challenges of our time. EPSRC believes that engineering has a crucial role to play in developing synthetic biology for



the benefit of the UK, and has made significant investment in support of this emerging research field. Research cannot and should not exist in a vacuum, oblivious to public perceptions and concern. We recognise the need to understand fully the public's views and attitudes on synthetic biology in order to reflect these in our strategies and policies. We see the need for our researchers to show responsibility for the societal implications of their work and engage with this debate."

The Synthetic Biology Public Dialogue involved members of the public in discussions around synthetic biology and included specialists on the science, governance, application and control of this emerging area of science and technology. The Dialogue was conducted under

contract by TNS-BMRB under the supervision of independent oversight and steering committees. Both committees were chaired by the independent consultant Brian Johnson. 160 members of the public were engaged in the process, through three workshops which took place in London, North Wales, Newcastle and Edinburgh. 41 stakeholder interviews were also conducted.

BBSRC is the UK funding agency for research in the life sciences. Sponsored by Government, BBSRC annually invests around £470 million in a wide range of research that makes a significant contribution to the quality of life in the UK and beyond and supports a number of important industrial stakeholders, including the agriculture, food, chemical, healthcare and pharmaceutical

sectors. www.bbsrc.ac.uk

EPSRC is the main UK government agency for funding research and training in engineering and the physical sciences, investing more than £850 million a year in a broad range of subjects - from mathematics to materials science, and from information technology to structural engineering. www.epsrc.ac.uk

BBSRC and EPSRC are part of the Research Councils UK partnership (RCUK) www.rcuk.ac.uk

Sciencewise - ERC is a Department for Business, Innovation and Skills funded programme to bring scientists, government and the public together to explore the impact of science and technology in our lives. It helps policy makers in Government departments and

agencies commission and use public dialogue to inform decision making in emerging areas of science and technology. Its core aim is to develop the capacity of Government to carry out good dialogue, to gather and disseminate good practice, have successful two-way communications with the public and other stakeholders.

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

The curious way that Parliament works is a mystery to most of the world, especially to incoming members! After a series of recent meetings covering the P&SC, POST, Pitcom, APComms and others I was asked about the history of some of these bodies. That caused me to check with the Library to remind myself of the link between the P&SC and POST.

In 1939 the Parliamentary and Scientific Committee (P&SC) was formed. In 1986 the P&SC determined the need for a new institution and sent a delegation to the then Prime Minister to suggest that some form of resource be established: the idea received a warm reception, but no public funding was forthcoming.

As a result of that dialogue the Parliamentary Office of Science & Technology (POST) commenced operation as an independent entity in April 1989. At that time it received four years' pilot funding from a group of foundations: the Nuffield Foundation, the Gatsby Foundation, the Leverhulme Trust, the Wellcome Trust, the Royal Society, the Fellowship of Engineering, plus some individual Members.

An information Committee report from 4th March 1992 recommended that POST be funded for three years from April 1993 (the point when the pilot funding was to end), and that public funding be reconsidered at that time. According to the House of Commons Commission report of 1995-96, funding was renewed for 5 years in April 1996.

The House of Commons Information Committee (one of the then domestic committees), on which I served in the 1992 and 1997 Parliaments recommended the incorporation of POST into the House services.

As I am the sole surviving link in the Commons to this process I thought I should set out the record before it is all lost in the mists of time!

Andrew Miller MP

Chair, Parliamentary and Scientific Committee.

