



NUFFIELD  
COUNCIL ON  
BIOETHICS

Strategic Plan  
**2018-2022**

Informing policy and public debate  
about the ethical implications of  
biological and medical research

# Contents

Foreword	3
Introduction	5
Strategic goals 2018-2022	6
Delivering our goals	10

## Nuffield Council on Bioethics

The Council's terms of reference are:

- to identify and define ethical questions raised by recent developments in biological and medical research that concern, or are likely to concern, the public interest;
- to make arrangements for the independent examination of such questions with appropriate involvement of relevant stakeholders;
- to inform and engage in policy and media debates about those ethical questions and provide informed comment on emerging issues related to or derived from its published or ongoing work; and
- to make policy recommendations to Government or other relevant bodies, and to disseminate its work through published reports, briefings, and other appropriate outputs.

# Foreword

Over the last 27 years, the Nuffield Council on Bioethics has grown and developed into an internationally recognised organisation with a wide range of outputs and with considerable influence. I have followed that progress with great interest, and I was delighted to be appointed as Chair of the Council in 2017. Since then we have been working hard on our 2018-2022 Strategic Plan, which outlines a number of key ways in which we intend to develop over the next five years.

There are enormous challenges facing society today: an ageing population, health inequalities, infectious diseases, and the emergence of medication-resistant microbes. Extraordinary and rapid developments in medical science – in genomics and in artificial intelligence, in particular – may help address these and other challenges, yet we must be well apprised of the social, political and economic context in which these and scientific advances take shape.

Over the coming five years, we will further develop our ability to provide timely and authoritative contributions to public and policy debates that arise as medical science progresses. We will enhance our horizon-scanning processes that inform how we identify and prioritise our work. We will deliver an increased range of outputs, and find effective means of responding to those issues that call for short-term or immediate comment or analysis by the Council.

One of the most valuable contributions we can make is to ensure our work is received and understood by people affected by the issues we consider, and in doing so, we should ensure that wider perspectives are received and understood by us. Effective public and stakeholder engagement to inform and to disseminate our work will be a key plank of this plan.

I firmly believe that the role we play in providing independent advice to policy-makers and in informing debate in the public interest will become even more important in the future in a complex and fast-moving world of biomedical scientific progress. Over the next five years, we will seek to increase our engagement with policy-makers and our contributions to media debates in order to ensure we are making useful interventions and maximising our influence. We will also extend our international profile and seek to develop new relationships with people beyond the borders of the UK.

We commit to delivering four strategic goals, which will inform the distinctive contribution of the Council and help define our future work:

- We will engage and involve relevant stakeholders in our work.
- We will contribute effectively to public and policy debates through a diverse portfolio of work.
- We will build on our experience, reputation, and body of work.
- We will situate our work within a context of social change, international collaboration, and biomedical advances.

I look forward to leading the Council in the delivery of this Strategic Plan.

**David Archard**

Chair, Nuffield Council on Bioethics

## We aim to...

- **Inform** policy and public debate through timely consideration of the ethical questions raised by biological and medical research so that the benefits to society are realised in a way that is consistent with public values.

## We do this by...

- **Engaging** a range of public, professional, political, and policy stakeholders to ensure that the Council is aware of, and responsive, to the major issues of interest and concern to them.
- **Involving** a broad range of expertise and opinion to develop a range of high-quality outputs and activities.
- **Contributing** to contemporary discussions of bioethics in professional and policy arenas, including making recommendations to Government or other bodies in a timely, practical, and relevant way.
- **Leading** public debate on bioethics issues by playing an active role in media, policy, and professional fora both nationally and internationally

## In keeping with our values of...

- **Quality, rationality, and rigour.** All aspects of our work should draw on a wide range of expertise, deliver to the highest possible standards, be based on the best evidence available, and be supported by careful and comprehensive analysis.
- **Independence.** Members of the Nuffield Council on Bioethics and of our working groups should be selected for their individual qualities and expertise, not to represent any particular group or view. Whilst consulting widely, we should be free to select the topics, and the content, of our outputs.
- **Transparency and inclusiveness.** We should work in a way that is clear and accessible to diverse audiences. Whilst the expression of all views is encouraged and welcomed, we should favour no single view or approach to bioethics.
- **Relevance and timeliness.** We should aim to work on issues that are of significance to society, so that our outputs can support policy developments and debates.

# Introducing the Strategic Plan 2018-2022

The Nuffield Council on Bioethics makes a distinctive contribution in its field by publishing reports that tackle some of the most difficult issues in the biosciences. We have built a sound reputation over our 27 years based on the quality and impact of our work.

Whilst our in-depth reports are our most tangible product, our work reaches far beyond this. We engage with many people through consultative processes, published papers and briefings, meetings and workshops, our website and social media channels, and through involvement in the media.

Our work is taking place in a context of significant political, social, and economic change. Over the next five years, we will need to respond and adapt to a changing environment, building on what we have achieved in the past to enable us to engage in important areas at the right time.

The first task of the Council will always be to identify issues at the earliest stage, so that we can anticipate, rather than react, to questions that are or are likely to be of public concern. To do this we will need to be aware of those issues by keeping abreast of public opinion and debate; and to ensure we are fully engaged in a range of science, policy, and research networks.

The Council is firmly located in UK networks, but we are very aware of the importance of forging global connections. We have taken a leading role in European and world-wide fora of national ethics committees, and our work has relevance and influence across the globe, but there is potential to widen our role and influence on international stages.

The thoroughness of our work means it often has lasting relevance, and increasingly our interventions in policy and public debate are drawn together from a range of previous projects. Whilst science and medicine advances, and social conditions change, the questions that arise frequently reflect those articulated in earlier debates. We must be ready to manage our intellectual capital so that the value of the Council's past work can be maximised.

In light of these changing and growing demands, it is essential that we have the means, the structures, and the flexibility to allow us to work in new ways. We need to maintain a broad programme of work that enables us to look to the horizon and be ready to initiate new and major projects. At the same time, we need to retain a flexibility to respond rapidly to new questions or new contexts, in order to inform public and media debates, and address policy needs.

The following sections set out four strategic goals that we will prioritise in pursuing our objectives, and the programmes of work through which these will be delivered and monitored.

# Strategic goals 2018-2022

## 1. We will engage and involve relevant stakeholders in our work

It is important for the Council to engage constructively with a wide range of stakeholders in several different contexts. First, we need to identify emerging issues in a timely fashion; second, we need to seek contributions to our own deliberations so that all relevant perspectives can be heard; and third, we need to engage in public and policy debate about those issues in order to promote informed discussion of bioethics and disseminate our conclusions. In each case, we will need to be clear about our objectives and priorities, and will need to look for the most effective ways of engaging groups and reaching audiences, often working with the media and partner organisations who have greater reach into public spheres or specific interest groups.

In order to be effective, the Council needs to be in a position to identify major developments that have the potential to have a significant impact on people, society, and the wider environment. We will develop a more systematic approach to **horizon-scanning**, consulting with people from different sectors of science, medicine, policy, and civil society in order to identify questions to which we can make a unique contribution.

The issues that the Council examines invariably raise complex questions that need to be approached from a number of different academic and societal perspectives. We will continue to use our extensive networks and **consultation** exercises to ensure that we benefit from a wide range of knowledge, expertise, and experience. This includes contributions from Council members, expert working groups, calls for evidence, commissioned and desk-based research, and consultations with interested groups and the wider public, as appropriate to each project.

To **disseminate and promote** our work, the Council will engage constructively and proactively with parliamentarians, policy-makers, regulators, professional bodies, and the media, ensuring that we are able to deliver considered interventions that are timely and relevant. We will ensure our work is accessible to diverse audiences, primarily through the media, our website, and other online channels.

We will be open to establishing and developing partnerships with others working in academic, policy, and media environments who are in a position to deliver information and achieve influence, but only where the aims of those actions are consistent with our objectives, and where our independence will not be compromised.

## 2. We will contribute effectively to public and policy debates through a diverse portfolio of work

The Council has, in the past, focused on **delivering in-depth reports** on key issues arising in the context of developments in biological and medical research. These reports are the cornerstone on which our **reputation for high-quality** and influential contributions have rested. The thorough nature of these in-depth projects means that they often take a considerable time to develop from identification of the core issues to the delivery of a report with detailed conclusions and recommendations. Whilst it is important that we maintain a programme of work that examines questions in such depth, it is also important to recognise how quickly research moves, and the speed at which new issues can be pitched into the public sphere. Moreover, there is an increasing awareness that the ethical questions arising in connection with such research need to be raised and considered – often in a very public discussion – at an early stage.

The Council is well placed to use its **convening power** – the ability to rapidly engage a range of experts and other contributors from different

sectors and disciplines – to facilitate debate and to develop important policy-focused outputs. We will continue to adapt our processes so that we are better able to respond in tailored ways to particular policy pressures. More specifically, we will develop the ability, capacity, and working methods that will support **more rapid policy interventions aimed at influencing**, for example through short briefing papers and more closely focused reports; through media and social media; and through continued engagement with policy-makers and those with particular interests in the areas in which we work.

Carrying out different kinds of work will enable us to contribute flexibly and effectively, with policy-relevant contributions tailored to each situation. This could entail a timely framing of the ethical questions; a more in-depth consideration of the issues; a preliminary analysis in advance of an extended project; or the development of a clear Council position. In carrying out such activities, the Council will continue to ensure that the **quality and rigour** of our work, on which our reputation stands, is maintained.

### 3. We will build on our experience, reputation, and body of work

The Council has worked on a wide range of issues over the years: from human genetics to research involving animals; from public health to neurotechnologies; and from human tissue to biofuels. Several of our reports have continued to have **relevance and influence** for many years after their publication. For example, our report on healthcare research in developing countries, published in 2002, is still cited in academic and policy arenas as an important foundation for ongoing study and practice. Our 2015 report on the collection and use of data in biological research and healthcare is likely to continue to have a significant role in supporting ongoing discussion around wider questions of the ethics of data use.

We also see elements of our reports resonating in areas beyond their immediate point of focus. The ‘intervention ladder’ we devised in our 2007 public health report has been used to inform transport policy, and our framework for the development of biofuels from 2011 has been picked up in other contexts of biotechnology research.

As such, it is important that we develop a way to maintain an overview of how our intellectual capital is used and how it might continue to be exploited. To do this, we will introduce a more robust **knowledge management system**, which we will link to our horizon-scanning activities and our monitoring of the outcomes of our previous work. This will allow better integration of our earlier work into our ongoing programme of **active response activities**, drawing creatively on past work to make it relevant to **current public and media debates**. This will also support our profile as a leader in bioethics thinking in the UK and internationally.

We will continue to harness relevant expertise from a wide circle of contributors – for example through our network of affiliates – to ensure that we can optimise our engagement in a range of public and policy discussions.



## 4. We will situate our work within a context of social change, international collaboration, and biomedical advances

Society benefits from, but can also be challenged by, developments in biological and medical research, and those **challenges are invariably complex** and multifaceted, perhaps increasingly so. We see the **convergence of technologies**, for example, digital technology intersecting with biological research, in ways that create novel questions. These will include the use of artificial intelligence or machine learning in a healthcare context; and the integration of machines into human biological systems.

Alongside these developments, we see changing contexts: an increasing focus on the potential for science to drive economic growth - but with the attendant risk that it becomes detached from public values; the rising influence of social media and online connectivity; variable levels of trust in institutions; and shifts in our understanding and expectations of areas such as data use.

Additionally, the development and application of biological and medical research is increasingly **international** in its reach and its practice. This has important implications in terms of transferring new knowledge into other regions and domains, and for the regulatory mechanisms that help govern it. This can be particularly challenging when a significant proportion of scientific research and

development takes place in countries whose regulatory systems and societal norms are very different to those in the UK and Europe.

With this in mind, the Council will take a proactive approach to increasing our international profile. For example, we will target media to reach international audiences beyond academia. We will consider the international dimension of our work across all our activities from horizon-scanning to influencing. We will monitor developments relevant to the Council's work worldwide to ensure that we are in a position **to respond in both a national and international context**. We will continue to participate fully and actively in networks of national bioethics advisory bodies as well as scientific academic groups so that we are well placed to recognise relevant new developments, and to engage with experts and policy-makers worldwide.

We will monitor relevant changes in national and international **governance systems, in particular** changes that might follow from the UK's withdrawal from the European Union, whose collaborative research initiatives and Europe-wide regulatory mechanisms have until now been an important feature of the UK environment.

# Delivering our goals

We will deliver our strategic goals through the following programmes of work:

## Horizon-scanning

This will involve:

- Establishing a strategic approach to identifying developments relevant to biological and medical research.
- Engaging with a wide range of organisations and individuals, and monitoring literature and news, across different fields of interest and expertise.
- Publishing the outcomes of our horizon-scanning activities in a coherent and accessible format.

What we hope to achieve is:

- An increased awareness of major developments relevant to biological and medical research to inform how the Council prioritises and carries out its work.

## Active response programme

This will involve:

- Contributing to or initiating discussions about developments in biological and medical research, for example by producing policy briefing papers, organising workshops and other events, providing media commentary, and engaging with parliamentarians.
- Drawing on past work to highlight Council conclusions and recommendations, or to articulate the ethical issues raised by new topics.
- Establishing decision-making processes that enable rapid interventions to be made by the Council if appropriate.

What we hope to achieve is:

- Regular, timely contributions to policy and public debates about bioethics, and increased awareness of the Council's role as an independent, high-quality contributor.

## In-depth inquiries

This will involve:

- Considering complex ethical issues raised by developments in biological and medical research and, as appropriate, making policy recommendations to Government and other relevant bodies.
- Wide consultation with experts, stakeholders, and/or the general public.
- Conducting rigorous analysis with robust quality control systems.
- Publishing high-quality reports and supporting materials that are focused, relevant, accessible, and timely.
- Promoting and disseminating published reports to policy-makers and other stakeholders through media engagement, events, meetings, and other communications activities.

What we hope to achieve is:

- The publication of high-quality and comprehensive reports that inform and influence public and policy debates of contemporary significance, and to build the Council's reputation for delivering high-quality, independent, and useful contributions.

## External relations

This will involve:

- Developing an external relations strategy that supports all key functions of the Council.
- Establishing a clear and active public affairs function to enhance the role and visibility of the Council around Westminster, Whitehall, and other policy centres.
- Making greater use of digital and social media to enhance our online profile and influence.
- Increasing our role in international networks, and identifying new opportunities to promote our work in international arena.

What we hope to achieve is:

- An enhanced influence and profile in national and international scientific and policy arenas.

## Governance

This will involve:

- Working with the Governing Board to ensure that the Council operates in accordance with its terms of reference, and to the highest standards of quality and integrity.
- Developing business management and accountability processes that support our key functions.
- Reviewing and developing the Council membership to ensure it is appropriate for the ongoing demands of the future work programme.

What we hope to achieve is:

- Assurance that the Council is working effectively and in accordance with the terms of its funding, and that any concerns about the quality or management of our work are identified and addressed at the earliest opportunity.

## Evaluation

This will involve:

- Reviewing and implementing evaluation procedures for monitoring and reporting on the Council's performance.
- Identifying specific objectives for quantitative and qualitative standards in each of the main areas of our work.
- Operating an ongoing process of review, learning, and improvement.

What we hope to achieve is:

- Continual review and improvement of the Council's performance, impact, and influence.

Since the Nuffield Council on Bioethics was established in 1991, interest in biological and medical research and in bioethics has continued to grow, along with the breadth, complexity, and societal importance of the issues to which they give rise.

*Our aim is to inform policy and public debate through timely consideration of the ethical questions raised by biological and medical research so that the benefits to society are realised in a way that is consistent with public values.*

**These are our strategic goals:**

- **We will engage and involve relevant stakeholders in our work.**
- **We will contribute effectively to public and policy debates through a diverse portfolio of work.**
- **We will build on our experience, reputation, and body of work.**
- **We will situate our work within a context of social change, international collaboration and biomedical advances.**

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“The Council is committed over the next five years to enhancing its well-established reputation as the UK’s best source of independent and rigorous advice on bioethics, and using its influence both here and internationally.”

**Professor David Archard,**  
Chair of the Nuffield Council on Bioethics

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