



Impact Report

1991 - 2026





www.nuffieldbioethics.org



bioethics@nuffieldbioethics.org

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Foreword

Picture by Alessandra Dragoi / DSIT



Lord Vallance of Balham
Minister of State for Science,
Innovation, Research and Nuclear,
Department for Science,
Innovation and Technology

It gives me great pleasure to recognise the invaluable contributions that the Nuffield Council on Bioethics (NCOB) has made to science and society over the last 35 years. The Council's quality work continues to shape our rapidly evolving scientific landscape and helps to ensure that world-leading UK science is guided by and delivers for the British people.

The Council's commitment to rigorous, independent scrutiny of the ethical questions raised by advances in biology and medicine plays a vital role in ensuring the UK is innovating responsibly. In an age where the boundaries of possibility are being redrawn by advances in engineering biology, artificial intelligence, and data-driven healthcare, NCOB's work is more important now than ever.

The Council's impact in keeping the UK at the forefront of cutting-edge science is exemplified by its work on mitochondrial donation techniques. In 2012, amidst rapidly advancing research into these techniques, NCOB published a report supporting their use in treatment and conditions to guide its safe and effective implementation. In 2015, the UK became the first country in the world to legalise the use of these techniques in treatment. As a result, families in the UK at risk of passing on mitochondrial disease gained access to a groundbreaking treatment that gives them a chance to have a genetically related child, born free from mitochondrial disease.

The Council also had significant influence on the development and implementation of the Genetic Technologies (Precision Breeding) Act 2023, particularly concerning genome editing in farmed animals. NCOB's public deliberative dialogue helped to ensure that public values were at the centre of the legislative debate. The recommendations on animal welfare in the report **Genome editing and farmed animal breeding: social and ethical issues** are now reflected in the legislation.

It's critical that we continue to embed ethics and our values at the heart of UK science as we look ahead to the next 35 years and continue to unlock the enormous potential of biotechnology.

I wish the Council the very best success in continuing to be a guiding force in British scientific debate and shaping policy for the benefit of society.

Minister Vallance

Introduction

The Nuffield Council on Bioethics (NCOB) is an independent research and policy centre working to embed ethics in decisions about biomedicine and health, for the benefit of all.

For more than three decades we have provided impartial, evidence-based advice and guidance to support decision makers in their navigation of the ethical dilemmas raised by developments in research and healthcare. From a two-person team in 1991, we have grown and evolved to become the UK's leading organisation working at the intersection of bioethics and public policy.

A strong, collaborative relationship between our expert **Council members** and dedicated **Executive team** sits at the heart of all we do. Our independence means we are well placed to bring people together from across sectors and society, ensuring our work is informed by a wide range of people, views and expertise. And it is the respect and trust we have earned over many years that means we attract leading experts to join our Working Groups and engage with our work.

Long before such approaches became widely adopted, we embraced a transdisciplinary way of working, bringing together diverse academic disciplines alongside practitioners and policymakers, and fostering collaboration that meaningfully bridges research, practice and policy.

This report celebrates our impact through bringing together stories from our 35-year history. Many of these have evolved over years – sometimes even decades – reflecting both the enduring relevance of our work and the time that is often needed to achieve deep policy change and influence national conversations.

These stories demonstrate how our work can bring clarity to areas of significant uncertainty. They showcase the value of engaging with the public to understand what trustworthy innovation looks like. And they capture how our work has helped to build the ethical foundations of policies, regulation and research that delivers equitable, transparent and beneficial outcomes for people and society.

Timeline of key moments

Establishment

The Nuffield Council on Bioethics (NCOB) is founded by the Nuffield Foundation, in response to concerns that the UK lacks a national body devoted to assessing the ethical implications of advances in biological and medical research.

First Chair and Director

Sir Patrick Nairne appointed as Chair (1991 – 1996).
David Shapiro appointed as Director (1991 -1997).

New funding model

The Wellcome Trust and Medical Research Council join the Nuffield Foundation as co-funders.

First contributions to a Parliamentary inquiry

Invited as an expert witness to the House of Commons Select Committee on Science and Technology inquiry on human genetics.

New Director

Professor Sandy Thomas appointed as Director (1997 – 2006).

1991

1993

1994

1996

1997

First report published

Genetic screening: ethical issues publishes in December

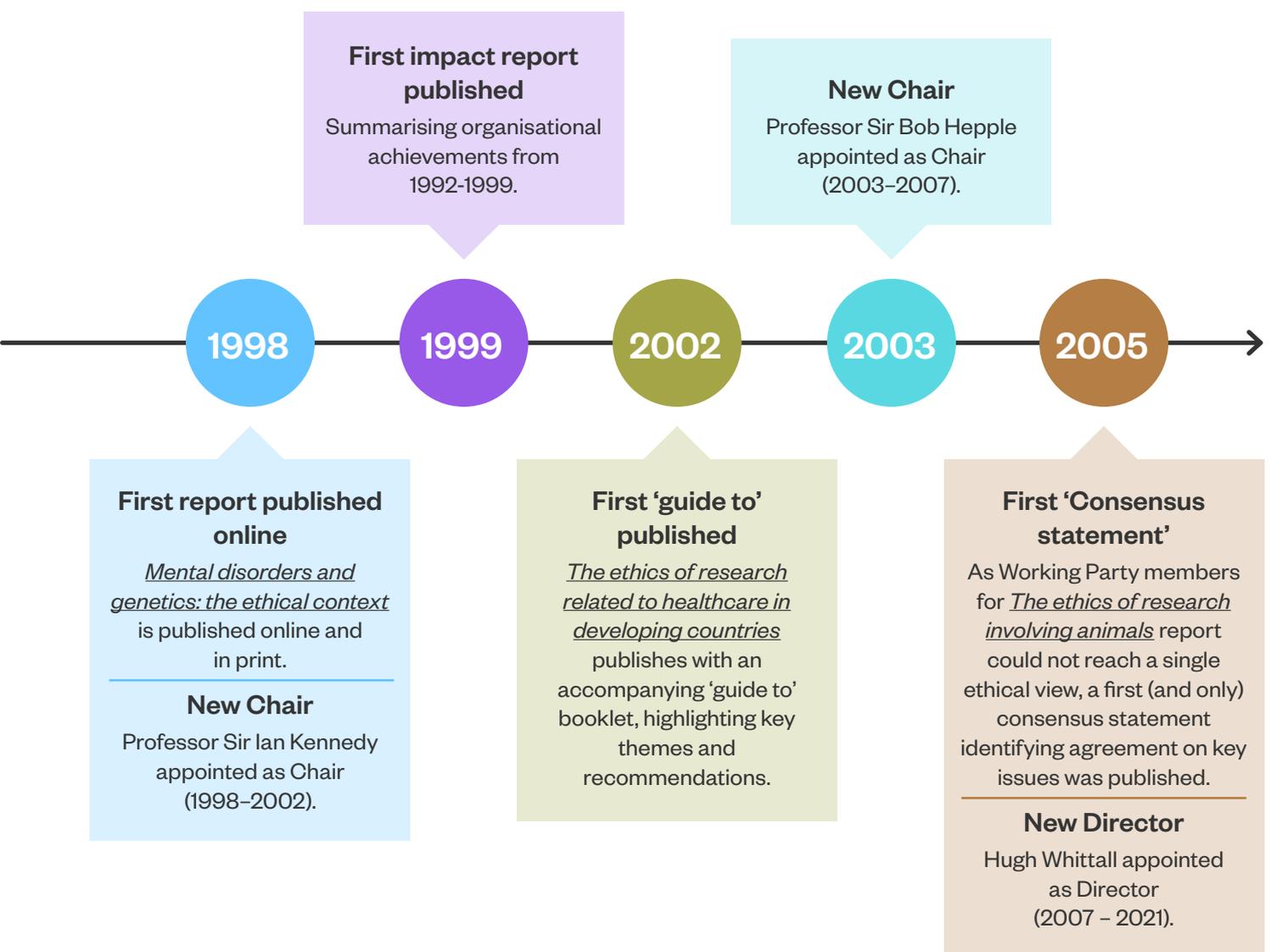
Increasing media presence

Working Party members from the *Animal-to-Human Transplants: the ethics of xenotransplantation* report are quoted widely across UK press.

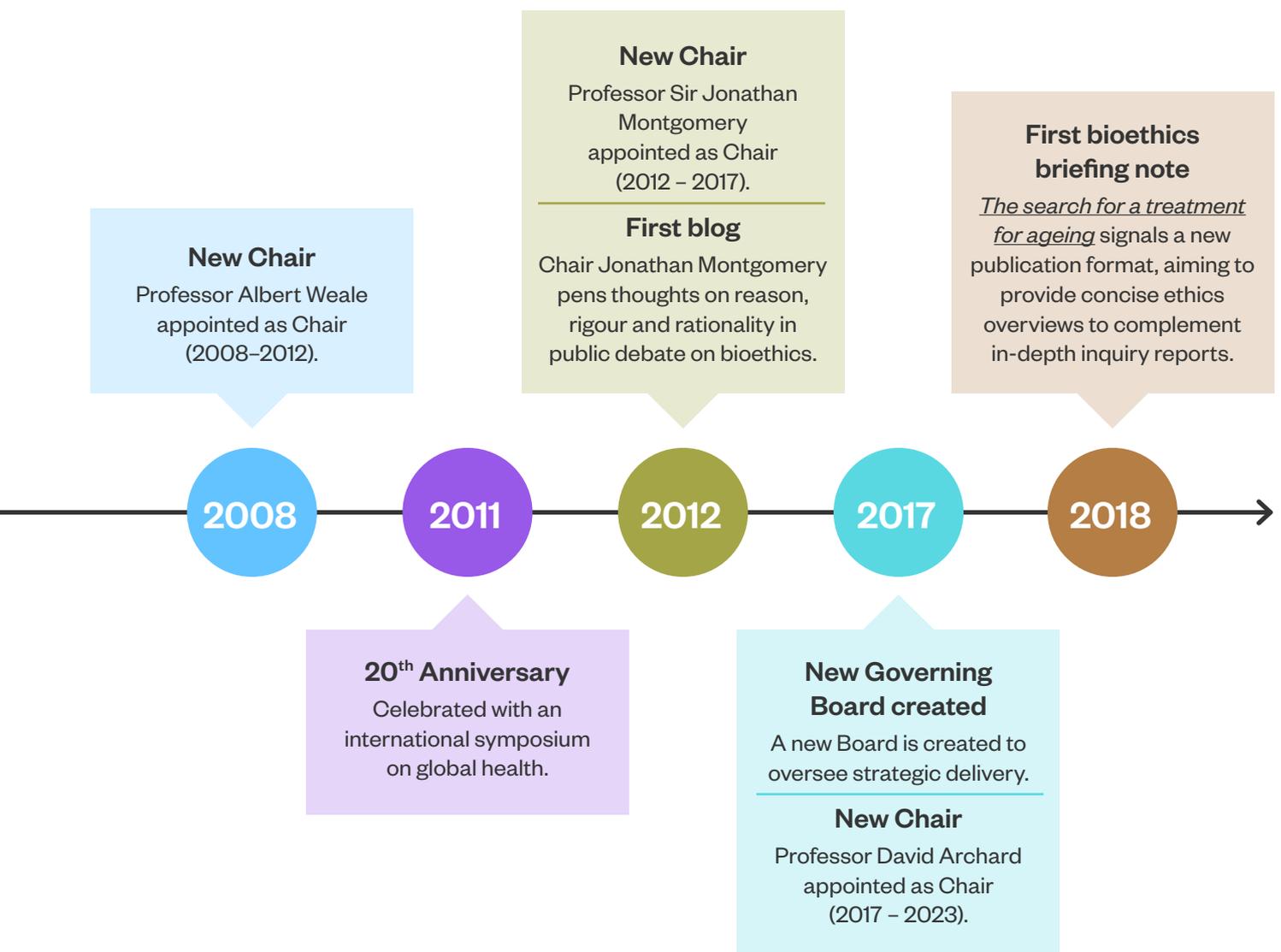
New Chair

Baroness Professor Onora O'Neill appointed as Chair (1996-1998).

Timeline of key moments



Timeline of key moments



Timeline of key moments

New Chair

Professor Sarah Cunningham-Burley appointed as Chair (2024 – present).

New priority areas

Making ethics matter strategy introduces these priority areas:

Reproduction, parenthood and families

The mind and brain

The environment and health

New brand

A brand refresh introduces a new logo, website and visual identity

First timeframed horizon scan

Horizon Scan 2024 aims to display topics within a timeframe that they could raise ethical implications.

First commissioned public dialogues

Building on a history of consultation and wide engagement, public dialogues on Covid-19/pandemics and on genome editing and farmed animals are commissioned.

New Director

Danielle Hamm appointed as Director (2021 – present).

2020

2021

2022

2024

2026

First horizon scan published

Horizon Scan 2020 identifies 49 bioethics topics.

First independent commission from Government

Secretary of State for Health and Social Care orders an *Independent review of disagreements that arise in the care of critically ill children in England*.

35th Anniversary

35 years in numbers



8 Chairs of Council



4 Directors



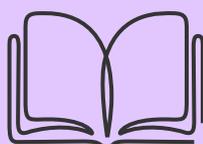
140 Council meetings



34 Working Groups



More than **400** members of the public involved in deliberative dialogues



80 reports and publications



262 blog posts (since 2012)



427 news stories published on our website (since 2012)



Grown blog subscribers to **3,650**



Grown newsletter subscribers to **3,000**



218 mentions in Parliament



11,150 mentions in media (since 2012) – averaging **858** per year



Over **2.4 million** visits to our website (since 2012) averaging **172,450** per year

Impact story:

Public health



2007

Setting the ethical groundwork for policies to promote health and healthier behaviours across the population

At the core of our **Public health: ethical issues** report were two key ethical concepts that have stood the test of time, remaining relevant to policymaking today:

- The “stewardship model” which sets out the state’s responsibility to make healthy choices more achievable.
- The accompanying “intervention ladder” which offers a structured way to assess the ethical justification for public-health measures – from doing nothing, to providing information, to implementing more intrusive measures which restrict choice or freedom.

These tools quickly began having an influence in national policymaking. In 2010, the Government’s **Healthy Lives, Healthy People** white paper on public health drew extensively on our intervention ladder to explain how it would approach devising policy measures to influence behaviour. In **his speech** to Parliament, Secretary of State for Health Andrew Lansley said: *“Reflecting the framework in the ladder of interventions developed by the Nuffield Council on Bioethics, we will adopt voluntary and less intrusive approaches, so that we can make more progress more quickly and resort to regulation only where we cannot make progress in partnership.”*

As well as gaining traction in Government policy, our work helped to shape professional practice when in 2010, NICE endorsed the stewardship model and used it to shape **guidance** on the prevention of alcohol-use disorders.

Our ethical framework gained renewed relevance early in 2020 as Governments around the world grappled with decision making during the Covid-19 pandemic. Questions of how to balance personal choice and societal duty, and about the appropriate role of the state in protecting people’s health needed to be assessed and answered at pace.

To support this, the NCOB moved to a rapid response publication model, delivering **reports and policy briefings** on issues such as treatment access, vaccine prioritisation and antibody testing. Each of these drew on our earlier public health work – building on this strong and robust ethical framework allowed us to deliver timely, relevant contributions at the moment they mattered most.

As the first wave of the pandemic began to ease in the summer of 2020, the Government unveiled its new strategy to tackle obesity in England, bringing new mandates including restrictions on advertising unhealthy foods to children and calorie labelling on menus. These actions aligned with **recommendations** we had made 13 years earlier, illustrating both the long-term nature of our impact and our ability to anticipate where further guidance would eventually be needed.

There was more impact to come, when we were asked to support the Cabinet Office Covid-19 Taskforce to bring ethical considerations into their ongoing management of the endemic virus. Using our intervention ladder as a guide, we **published ethics tools** to help decision-makers in Government develop a proportionate response to public health threats in the future.

The trajectory of impact from this report illustrates how a robust and accessible ethical framework can help shape policy and bring benefits in the long term. Over almost 20 years this work has been adopted, built on and operationalised across policy and practice in the UK, ensuring that ethical considerations are at the heart of decision making about people's health.

“ I found it fascinating working on the *Public Health: ethical issues* report and learned a lot from colleagues in adjacent fields. The ‘intervention ladder’ was a particularly helpful way of understanding the appropriateness of different levels of public health actions – its clarity has given it lasting impact in shaping how public health decisions are assessed.

Professor Dame Sally Macintyre

Emeritus Professor of Social and Public Health Sciences, University of Glasgow and Member of the Nuffield Council on Bioethics Working Party on public health



Impact story:

Organ donation



2011

Promoting ethically responsible implementation of an opt-out organ donation system in England and appropriate support for bereaved families

Human bodies: donation for medicine and research sets out an ethical framework highlighting the central role that altruism, trust and welfare should have in any donation system.

Upon its publication, this report attracted significant media attention. The coverage across all national newspapers and broadcasters majored on our recommendation for the NHS to consider paying the funeral expenses of organ donors.

Although this specific recommendation did not come to fruition, our work was vital in bringing ethical consideration into the design of an opt-out organ donation system in England. As the country prepared for this change in 2019, we revisited our ethical framework and highlighted what would be needed for people to place their trust in the new system. Although the law would change to an assumed consent for donation, families would still hold the final say when it came to granting permission. And we knew, through the engagement we'd done, that the families' experience – how supported, informed, and listened to they felt – would be crucial in maintaining public trust.

As the legislation was being developed, we briefed policymakers to emphasise this. Leveraging keen media interest in this issue, we worked to raise awareness of what was needed to make the opt-out system both ethical and effective. This included the importance of speaking about organ donation with your loved ones, and highlighting the need for an information campaign so that families were more knowledgeable about the practicalities of an opt-out system. Our advice permeated parliamentary debates and was acknowledged directly by the Minister responsible for the Bill and its provisions.

Through direct engagement with NHS Blood and Transplant, and by contributing to the Human Tissue Authority's Code of Practice for opt-out donation, we championed the need for practical measures to support bereaved families. We were assured that these would be included within the implementation of the opt-out system, meaning families navigating incredibly difficult decisions would feel more supported and empowered in their decision making.

“A guiding question for the Working Party was how to anticipate the consequences – intended and unintended – of encouraging organ donation through incentives. The report presented a compelling case for strategies founded upon ethical awareness and reasoning to encourage donation. That this approach then showed its value in the changed climate of an opt-out system, an unanticipated consequence of sorts, is a tribute to the calibre of their work.

Professor Dame Marilyn Strathern

Emeritus Professor of Social Anthropology, University of Cambridge and Chair of the Nuffield Council on Bioethics Working Group on the donation of bodily material



Impact story:

Mitochondrial DNA transfer



2012

Paving an ethical innovation pathway for assisted reproduction techniques that offer hope to families with mitochondrial DNA disorders

In 2012, scientific breakthroughs in mitochondrial DNA transfer – using mitochondria from a donor egg as part of IVF to prevent the transmission of inherited mitochondrial disorders – were gathering pace. The NCOB explored the difficult ethical questions raised by these emerging techniques and [released a report](#) with recommendations relevant to all those trying to understand and respond to the possibility of using these techniques in the clinic.

Given the severe and often devastating impacts of mitochondrial disorders, the report concluded that if the IVF methods proved safe and effective through further research, this treatment would be an ethically acceptable option for families at risk of passing on disease. We stipulated conditions under which this technique should be offered to affected families such as only with information and counselling for prospective parents provided by trained specialists, and only with long-term follow up and evaluation.

The media interest we secured succeeded not only in bringing it to the attention of decision makers worldwide, but also – the [Guardian](#) and [BBC](#) articles in particular – in challenging an unhelpful ‘three parent baby’ narrative that was prevalent in much of the media and public commentary at the time.

A nationwide public dialogue led by the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority followed our report, revealing public support for the translation of this research into the clinic. In 2014/15, we briefed politicians extensively to ensure our work was at the centre of debates leading up to a Parliamentary vote to decide whether the UK would approve regulation on mitochondrial DNA. Our report was referenced frequently in the chambers and in the [House of Commons research briefing](#) for the vote, which was passed. Our independent evidence and reasoning paved the way for parliamentarians to create regulations underpinned by ethical analysis and public trust and support.

The UK became the first country in the world to allow this treatment and in doing so gave families at risk of passing on heritable mitochondrial disorders hope of a new route of having a healthy, genetically-related child.

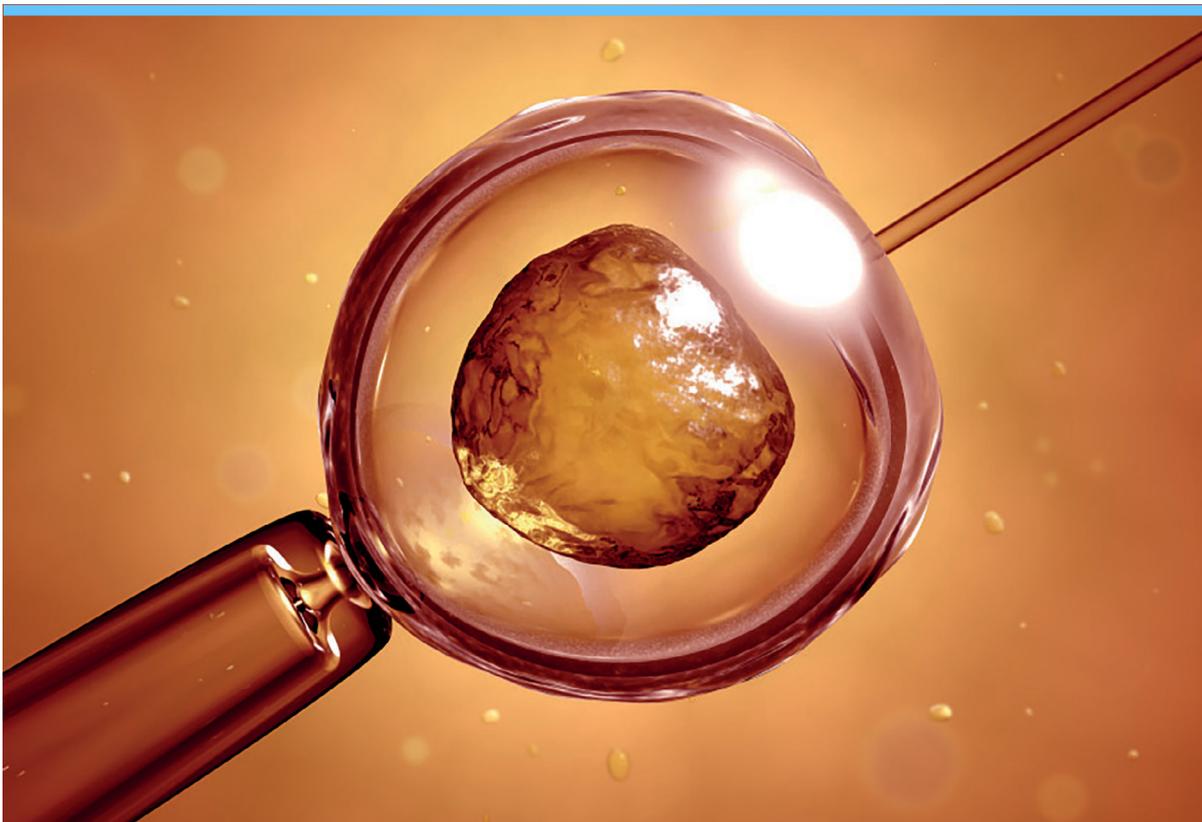
Last year, we learnt that the NHS Highly Specialised Mitochondrial Reproductive Care Pathway has supported the birth of **8 healthy children**.

Today the UK, alongside Australia, are the only two countries in the world where mitochondria transfer is legally permitted for use in treatment. We are proud of our role in making this happen.

“ The NCOB report was key to the change in the passing of The Human Fertilisation and Embryology (Mitochondrial Donation) Regulations 2015. In the debates in Parliament, and in the media, the independent and thorough NCOB review of the ethical issues around mitochondrial donation was vital to an informed discussion especially on such a contentious ethical issue.

Professor Sir Douglas Turnbull

Clinical lead for the NHS Highly Specialised Service for Rare Mitochondrial Diseases of Adults and Children



Impact story:

Cosmetic procedures



2017

Helping to ensure a safer and more ethical provision of cosmetic procedures for people in the UK

Cosmetic procedures: ethical issues was published at a time when concerns about body image, pervasive advertising and the growing pull of social media were heightening, and the UK was starting to look more critically at the promotion of beauty ideals in our society.

Our report aimed to galvanise policymakers, regulators, the media, and industry into action to encourage ethical practice – not only in the supply of cosmetic procedures, but also in the influences that steer people toward seeking them.

One of the key recommendations that came out of this work was that **under 18s should not be able to access invasive cosmetic procedures** unless a team of health professionals were involved. Our voice joined others calling for stronger protections for young people, and we played an influential role in securing the political interest needed to support a new Bill that wrote protections for under 18s into law. We briefed Parliamentarians throughout the passage of what became the Botulinum Toxin and Cosmetic Fillers (Children) Act – a landmark law that banned the administering of Botox and similar substances to anyone under the age of 18.

With awareness of the dangers of unregulated provision of cosmetic procedures growing, momentum was building for policymakers to take action to improve the safety of procedures. In 2022 the **Health and Care Act** paved the way for the Government to establish a licensing scheme for non-surgical procedures such as fillers and Botox for England and Wales.

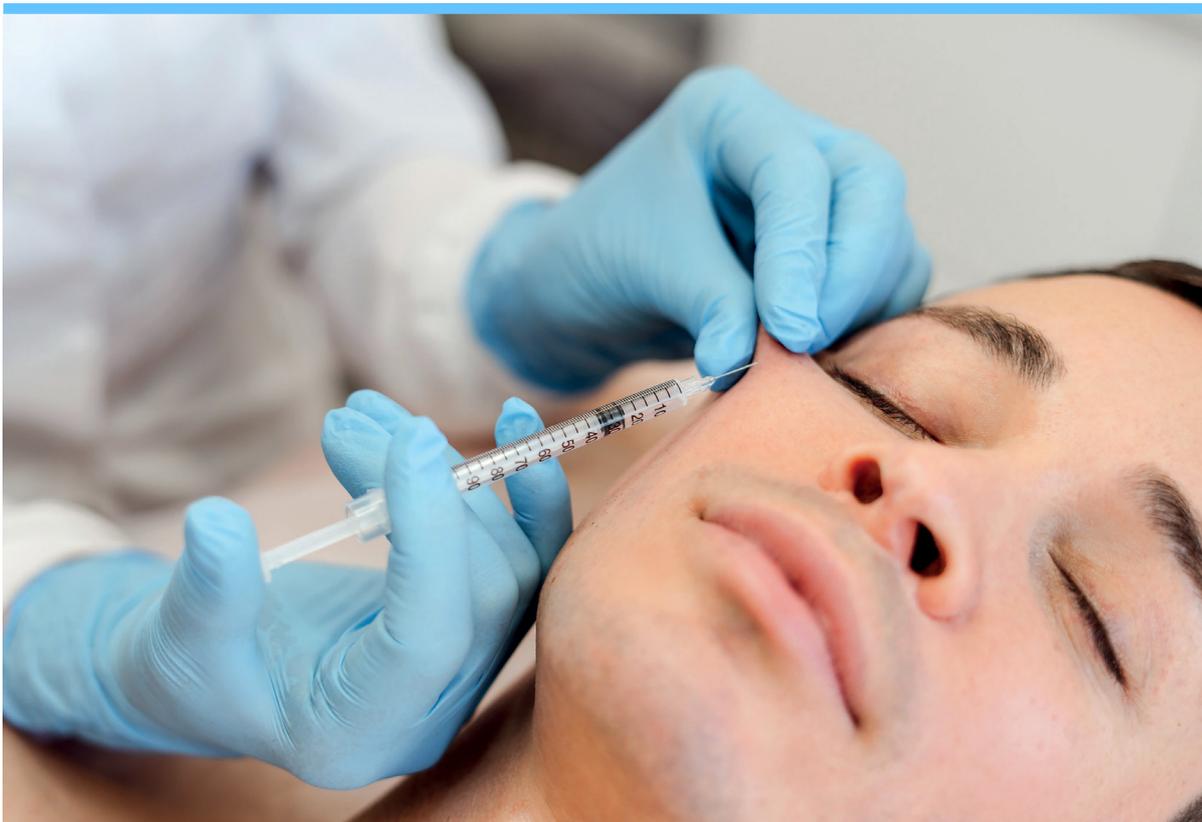
Furthermore, in 2025 the Department of Health and Social Care **announced new measures** aimed at tackling “cowboy cosmetic procedures”, in line with our recommendations. The plans will ensure that highest-risk treatments can only be performed by qualified healthcare professionals working within Care Quality Commission-registered providers.

These developments reflect years of work by the NCOB and others in calling for stronger regulation of non-surgical cosmetic procedures, with our ethical guidance helping shape meaningful protections for patients.

“I am very proud to be associated with this work, which I believe has contributed to a significant and positive shift in the understanding and practice of cosmetic procedures in the United Kingdom. There has been a welcome move away from the unconstrained commercial exploitation of the young and vulnerable, towards a culture that prioritises people’s safety and upholds the fundamental principle of doing no harm.

Mark Henley FRCS(Plast)

Consultant Plastic and Reconstructive Surgeon at Nottingham University Hospitals, President of the European Society of Plastic, Reconstructive and Aesthetic Surgery and Member of the Nuffield Council on Bioethics Working Party on cosmetic procedures



Impact story:

Non-invasive prenatal testing



2017

Ensuring access to a safe and responsible provision of prenatal testing, underpinned by accurate information and support for women and couples

Non-invasive prenatal testing (NIPT) is a technique used to test a fetus for a range of genetic conditions using a blood sample taken from the pregnant woman.

Our [work exploring the ethical implications](#) of NIPT emerged as the test was [being piloted in selected UK maternity units](#) as part of the NHS antenatal screening pathway. As a second stage test for Down's syndrome, Edwards' syndrome, and Patau's syndrome, NIPT offered the promise of clarity at an earlier stage of pregnancy, with the benefit of reducing the need for women to undergo further invasive testing. But there were concerns that making it available on the NHS could be perceived as sending negative and hurtful messages about the value of people with the syndromes being tested for. Whilst decision makers grappled with the implications of rolling this out on the NHS, there was also a lack of scrutiny of private provision of the test – meaning the need for ethical guidance felt urgent.

Our report concluded that families should have access to NIPT to enable them to find out at an early stage of pregnancy, if they wish, whether their fetus has a significant medical condition. We set out recommendations designed to ensure that the test was offered responsibly, safely, and with compassion, both in the NHS and private sector.

One year on from our report, in 2018 [NHS Wales began offering non-invasive prenatal testing](#) as a second stage screening test. We continued to [face an uphill battle](#) to convince regulators, professional bodies, and private companies of the need for action. However, our persistence reaped rewards as by the time NIPT was rolled out into the NHS pregnancy screening programme in England in 2021, a number of actions that we pushed for had happened:

- In line with our recommendations, the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists published professional guidance to support clinicians offering NIPT as a screening test, and [information about Down's syndrome on the NHS website](#) was updated to give a more balanced portrayal of Down's syndrome and what to expect from a life with the condition.

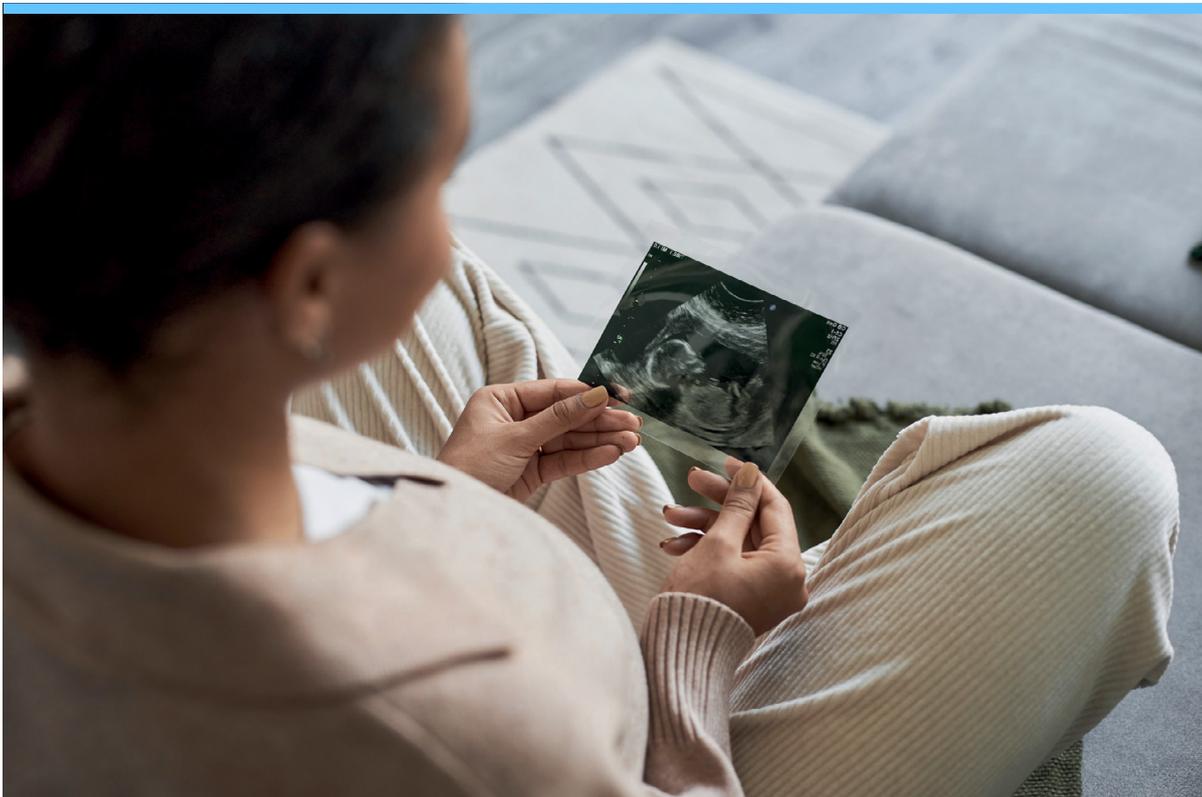
- The Care Quality Commission began inspecting private clinics in 2018, establishing safeguards around the information and support that clinics offer to people undergoing NIPT.
- The Advertising Standards Authority cracked down on misleading commercial claims about what NIPT can diagnose – banning online ads from three major private providers and issuing an Enforcement Notice to the entire sector to ensure clearer, more accurate information.
- Significantly, the UK’s largest private provider stopped offering NIPT for sex chromosome conditions after we raised concerns about the test’s highly variable accuracy.

Together these changes have made a real difference to those navigating pregnancy – giving them access to a safer, more responsible provision of NIPT and more reliable, accurate information on which to base their decision making.

“The working group on NIPT brought together people from different backgrounds, with a like mind and expertly supported by the NCOB’s Executive team. It was just the right time for a balanced statement on the ethics of NIPT and so the recommendations had a big impact.

Professor Tom Shakespeare

Professor of Disability Research, London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine and Chair of the Nuffield Council on Bioethics Working Group on NIPT



Impact story:

Research in global health emergencies



2020

Providing ethical guidance to promote fair and equitable research during emergencies such as the Covid-19 pandemic

Research in global health emergencies: ethical issues was delivered through the collaborative effort of an international working group who gathered evidence and experience from contributors across the globe.

Uniquely in NCOB history, this report culminated in a **Call for Action** to key players involved in health research to work together for a more ethical and community-focussed approach to conducting research during emergencies. This was supported by a collaborative of leading research institutions, funders and humanitarian organisations in Europe, Africa, North and South America – including Wellcome, the African Academy of Sciences, Fiocruz and the International Rescue Committee.

We published our findings in January 2020 as the Covid-19 pandemic was emerging, meaning our recommendations for ethical research practice took on immediate relevance.

Many of our working group members were drawn directly into the heart of the pandemic research response, joining expert groups with influential roles advising the World Health Organisation (WHO) and the UK Government.

Our **'ethical compass'** and recommendations for conducting research were picked up and used around the world. The WHO Ethics Working Group described our report as a "key ethical guidance document," and our emphasis on designing locally appropriate studies and early community engagement informed its toolbox on participatory practice for COVID-19 trials.

We also supported efforts to fast-track ethical research in low- and middle-income countries, for example playing a key role in forming the Ethics Working Group of the COVID-19 Clinical Research Coalition, which offered rapid advice to researchers working in resource-poor settings. Our guidance was woven into best-practice documents issued by organisations such as the Pan American Health Organization,

Zambia's National Health Research Authority, the Indian Council of Medical Research and [the Philippines National Health Research System advice for Research Ethics Committees](#).

With the support of partners across Asia, Europe, and the Middle East, we translated key parts of our report into Chinese, Farsi, French, Portuguese, Spanish, and Arabic to ensure it reaches as many researchers as possible. And its legacy has been extended further through partnerships with the Global Health Network on an online training course (available in multiple languages) and with the UK Health Research Authority on training materials for research ethics committees.

In 2021, new [guidelines](#) from UKRI and UNICEF drew on ours and others' work to help research [funders, commissioners, grant applicants](#) and reviewers to consider ethical issues when reviewing proposals for research in fragile and conflict-affected contexts. The guidelines reflected some of our [recommendations](#) to funders on how to achieve this – from involving communities in shaping research projects from the very beginning, to promoting equitable collaborations between researchers in different countries.

Through all of these different routes our work continues to support researchers, funders, governments, and global decision makers in navigating the challenges and dilemmas that arise during health emergencies, helping to steer fair and equitable research across the world.

“ The report’s emphasis on inclusivity, engagement, and equitable partnership, as well as the ethical obligation to undertake research in emergency contexts, have made it particularly influential. Many of the working group went on to play ethics advisory roles during the pandemic – enabling ethical questions to be identified, recognised and debated in policy spaces and in ways that would have not been possible without the foresight of NCOB to undertake this important work.

Professor Michael Parker

Professor of Bioethics and Director of the Ethox Centre, University of Oxford and Chair of the Nuffield Council on Bioethics Working Group on research in global health emergencies



Impact story:

Genome editing and farmed animals



2021

Ensuring public priorities for our food and farming system are reflected in the UK's regulatory framework for genetic technologies

Genome editing offers potential for addressing food insecurity by enabling the development of hardier crops and livestock with improved disease resistance and reduced environmental impacts. But as we learnt from the public backlash to genetically modified (GM) crops in the early 2000s, innovation in food and farming must be aligned with public values and grounded in ethics if it is to earn people's trust.

We published [Genome editing and farmed animal breeding: social and ethical issues](#) in 2021, as the science underpinning new breeding techniques was advancing and excitement about its potential was rising. In partnership with the BBSRC, we commissioned a public dialogue to understand people's views about the future of livestock farming including a potential role for genome editing. The [public were clear](#) that uses of the technology should fit within a clear, ethical vision for sustainable farming that supports farmers and protects high standards of animal welfare.

The report and public dialogue together were influential in shaping The Genetic Technologies (Precision Breeding) Act 2023 which established the framework for permitting genome editing in plants and farmed animals in England. Presenting our evidence to the Bill Committee and briefing widely to ensure our work was reaching Parliamentarians helped place [ethical considerations at the centre of the debate](#) – even to the extent of our report being waved on both sides of the Commons chamber during one memorable debate.

Ultimately our work helped secure cross-party support for animal welfare protections within the regulatory framework and equipped parliamentarians with the evidence and recommendations they needed to feel confident in passing legislation in such an ethically-charged area.

“We all need food. We also need to trust, at all levels, our food supply. Our timely report provided the value-driven framing for debate around livestock breeding approaches. My hope is that the momentum towards the appropriate use of these technologies, for example enabling disease resistance, continues and the UK does have a sustainable livestock agriculture future, supporting farmers animal welfare and the rural way of life.

Professor Bruce Whitelaw

Personal Chair of Animal Biotechnology, University of Edinburgh and Member of the Nuffield Council on Bioethics Working Group on genome editing and farmed animal breeding



Impact story:

The future of ageing



2023

Devising an ethical framework for research and innovation to support living well in older age

The future of ageing: ethical considerations for research and innovation explored the role that biomedical research and technological innovation can play in responding to the needs of an ageing population.

Through a **community engagement programme** and a deliberative **public dialogue**, we listened to older adults and other members of the public who shared their hopes, concerns, and values. This ensured that the policy changes we would go on to recommend were grounded in people's experiences, not assumptions, about ageing and the potential role of technology.

Our work shone a light on important questions about how we understand ageing and how older people are valued in our society. We used these insights to develop an ethical framework to encourage researchers, funders, policymakers and everyone involved in conducting research on ageing to assess ethical implications of their work. The framework underpinned 15 recommendations for shaping the future of ageing research and innovation.

Our ethical framework was endorsed at national policy level when Professor Sir Chris Whitty, England's Chief Medical Officer, welcomed the report as "hugely important" in his *2023 annual CMO report*, and reiterated the importance of placing ethics and public values at the heart of research relating to ageing.

In August 2025 a core theme from our report was reflected in a National Institute for Health and Care Research joint statement of intent to improve the **inclusion of older people in research**. Supported by more than 40 major UK health funders and charities including the Nuffield Foundation, UKRI and Wellcome, the statement echoed our recommendations which aimed to tackle the longstanding underrepresentation of older adults in medical research. This level of commitment from leading funders signals a new alignment with our message that ageing research must reflect the diversity, values, and agency of the people it is meant to serve.

By prioritising the meaningful participation of older adults, future research and innovation will be better placed to meet the real needs of an ageing population – and ultimately help people to flourish in later life.

“Advances in research and innovation are showing how we might enable older people to spend more of their later years in good health and with a good quality of life. The Nuffield Council on Bioethics’ report is a valuable contribution to making this happen, ensuring that an ethical approach is embedded across the research sector. We can all work together collectively to achieve this.

Professor Sir Chris Whitty
Chief Medical Officer for England



International impact



Bioethics is global by nature, and medical research is international in its reach.

The NCOB has long recognised the value of sharing knowledge across national boundaries and collaborating internationally to achieve greater impact in embedding ethics into policymaking. Building and maintaining a strong presence in international bioethics has therefore been important to us throughout our history.

We are distinctive amongst our equivalents in that most national bioethics councils are state-appointed, but the NCOB operates independently from Government. For 35 years we have worked to build a strong reputation as an influential and well-respected member of the global bioethics and policy community. We have developed close links to other ethics bodies abroad, especially those in Europe – participating in the twice-yearly Forum of National Ethics Councils which brings together national bioethics and data ethics councils across the EU and beyond.

We will continue to build on this work in the coming years. Our 2024 – 2028 strategy, **Making ethics matter**, sets out our intention to strengthen connections across bioethics networks, and amplify the voice of bioethics in policy and public debate. Cementing our position as a respected and active member of the international bioethics community, we will continue to develop new partnerships and connect with bioethicists globally to share learning and approaches.

“ The work of the Nuffield Council on Bioethics has been used as a key reference by the Council of Europe on issues of human rights and biomedical ethics, reflecting the quality and relevance of its in-depth ethical analysis.

Laurence Lwoff

Head of Health Division, Directorate of Social Rights, Health and Environment, Council of Europe

“ Ten years after the Ebola outbreak, our work with the NCOB on ethical approaches to conducting research and strong community engagement, remains vital. I am proud to have contributed to the development of the ‘ethical compass’ for research in global health emergencies; grounded in principles of respect, fairness, and the reduction of suffering.

Dr Jennyfer Ambe

Koinadugu College, Kabala, Sierra Leone and Africa CDC Ethics and Regulatory Working Group

The NCOB has published several reports with findings and recommendations that have proved influential in shaping global responses to emerging issues

Highlights include:

- The ethics of research related to healthcare in developing countries – 2002
- The use of GM crops in developing countries – 2003
- Biofuels: ethical issues – 2011
- Genome editing and human reproduction: social and ethical issues – 2018
- Research in global health emergencies: ethical issues – 2020



Spotlight on: Genome editing and human reproduction

- Our 2018 work on genome editing and human reproduction enabled us to have a prominent voice in international debates about the regulation and oversight of this technology.
- On publication, the report was covered by media in more than 20 different countries including 30 major global newswires and 600 local and regional news outlets across the world.
- 4 months after we published our recommendations, the world's media reported the first ever clinical use of heritable human genome editing in China.
- Our report fed directly into major international policy initiatives including those undertaken by the US National Academy of Medicine, the Council of Europe and the OECD.
- We collaborated with the French and German national bioethics councils to publish a **joint letter in Nature** highlighting ethical considerations in heritable human genome editing.

Impact highlights from 2025

Bringing us up to date, here are five key ways that our work in 2025 has contributed to our mission to make ethics matter.



We made significant strides in our ambition to evolve and enhance our horizon scanning, futures and foresight capabilities.

The addition of four leading experts in foresight to our advisory group provided a great boost to our work in 2025, helping to ensure we have the right expertise to anticipate and advise on emerging trends in bioethics.

A futures methodology was built into the research phase of an NCOB inquiry for the first time when scenario building was employed as part of our review of the 14-day rule for human embryo research. Through engaging a diverse group of experts with a range of prospective scenarios, we were able to explore the scientific possibilities in depth and strengthen our understanding of what the science could achieve. Insights from these scenarios were used to create stimulus materials for the public engagement phase of the project.

We advanced our **commitment to developing ethically-grounded horizon scanning and foresight methodologies** for policymakers through presenting our rapid ethical assessment (REA) at the flagship Civil Service World conference in November. Our session demonstrated to civil servants how the REA enables ethical implications within an acute policy development process to be identified and considered at pace, and the value that this can bring to policymaking.

Feedback from attendees of the Civil Service World conference showed:

- 88% people felt ethics training would be useful in policy training
- 94% people said the NCOB session made them understand ethics better
- 77% people said ethics could help them navigate tensions better



We forged a path of international engagement and discovery to explore how we could work more with others to strengthen the voice of ethics in global biomedicine and health policy.

2025 was an important year of information exchange and collaboration with international colleagues. To address a gap in knowledge about the connections that link together our international bioethics community, we commissioned a global **mapping exercise of organisations** that seek to influence policy in health and biomedicine. We held fact finding meetings and convened a group of experts for a roundtable to spark discussion about the role of bioethics in global policy development and decision making.

A key focus of these discussions was how we could capitalise more on shared opportunities, confront shared challenges, and work together better to bolster the translation of ethics into policy for global influence and impact. This was explored further when we co-hosted a plenary session at the 35th National Ethics Councils Forum in November on the state of bioethics in our changing world. We unearthed a shared appetite amongst colleagues at national ethics councils to find more effective means through which to share insights, build partnerships, and encourage co-production on specific topics.

One current example of this is our work on the **14-day rule for human embryo research**. Countries around the world are having to grapple with how to respond to progress in this area of research and the associated ethical and regulatory tensions. Engaging internationally to better understand the different values, drivers and governance systems that inform different countries' approaches to regulating embryo research is crucial to our work. In turn, we aim to produce findings that are useful and relevant not only to UK policy makers but also wider international audiences.





We secured new partnerships to further our reach and build new routes to collaborative impact

Having embraced the opportunity to convene a national genomics ethics network, in 2025 we successfully brought together four key organisations in the UK genomics sector to **back this initiative**. This network will foster knowledge exchange and co-produce ethical guidance for those working in genomics, bringing diverse expertise and resources together to ensure trustworthiness, transparency and ethical practice are at the centre of the UK's genomic research and healthcare system.

We embarked upon a **new partnership** with the International Society for Stem Cell Research (ISSCR) to explore whether it is possible to produce an international horizon scan that is timeframed for ethical implications. We look forward to sharing what we have learnt.

And we also **joined a research programme** exploring experimental governance frameworks for synthetic plant biology, **partnered with Sciencewise** to boost our public engagement for the 14-day rule project and **worked with international partners** on global guidelines for ethics committees assessing climate change and health related research.



We shared policy-facing outputs in all three strategic priority areas and embarked upon two timely new projects

2025 had a flying start when **we announced our major review** of the 14-day rule for human embryo research in our **reproduction, parenthood and families** priority area. This work will provide decision-makers with independent evidence and analysis to help evaluate policy options and better understand the ethical considerations involved in each. The first outputs from this project – briefings on the **scientific knowledge** and **ethical issues** – were published in November.

As this project continues we will gather further insights through our extensive **public dialogue**. This will utilise future scenarios to stimulate people's thinking on the scientific possibilities and the ethical and societal implications of these futures. As of November 2025, the **community conversations** phase was underway across the UK, and insights from these will feed into the development of a landmark Citizens' Summit in early 2026.

Taking forward our proposals on **the regulation of stem-cell based embryo models**, we secured the attendance of Health Minister Baroness Merron and Lord Willetts, Chair of the Regulatory Innovation Office alongside key regulators at a policy roundtable in May. We continue to work on implementing our recommendations,

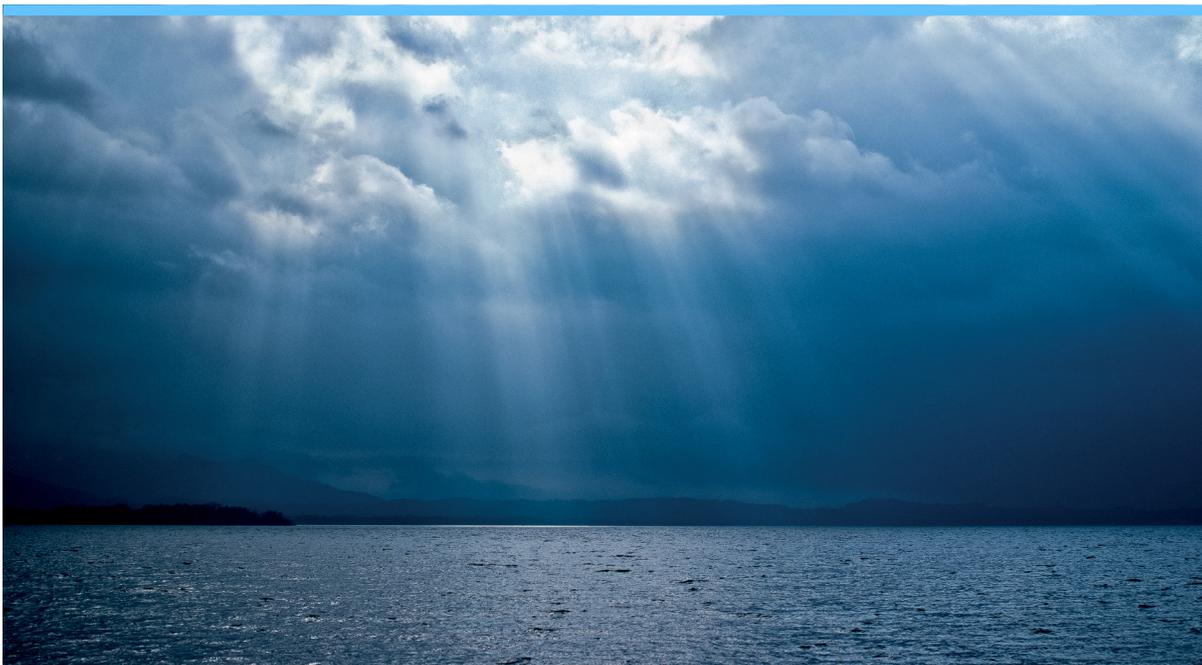
including building parliamentary and ministerial support for targeted amendments to the HFE Act governing embryo research in the UK.

Meanwhile in our **mind and brain** area we partnered with the **Nuffield Foundation** to explore emerging directions in genomics and education. Our **scoping report** maps the scientific landscape of the rapidly evolving field of polygenic index (PGI) research and set out challenges that arise when PGIs are considered in educational contexts. Building on this we convened a multidisciplinary workshop to discuss the most pressing ethical questions raised by the potential use of PGIs in education and published **the insights**, helping to shape the next phase of debate and inquiry in this area of policymaking.

We also progressed our work on neural organoids, drawing together all of the evidence gathering and **appointing an expert working group** to oversee the project and deliberate findings and recommendations which we look forward to sharing in 2026.

Early in 2025 we shared a key output in the **environment and health** priority area: **Climate change and health: embedding ethics into policy and decision making**. This report speaks directly to those shaping and delivering climate mitigation and adaptation strategies across government – making the case for placing ethics at the heart of climate change policy.

This report informed the **selection of solar radiation modification (SRM)** as our next in-depth project. SRM techniques aim to reflect sunlight away from the Earth to slow rising global temperatures caused by climate change. Our project will offer an independent and balanced ethical analysis of SRM, examining current research practices, future trajectories and impacts on present and future generations, as well as non-human species.





We took findings from our Citizens' Jury on assisted dying to parliamentarians involved in shaping proposals for reform in England, Wales and Scotland

Convening **England's first Citizens' Jury on assisted dying** has made a significant contribution to supporting a well-informed national conversation on this issue. In 2025 we **published the findings** from the Jury in full. We then worked to ensure that those responsible for developing and scrutinising legislation for England and Wales, and for Scotland, were aware of and able to draw on this evidence. The Terminally Ill Adults (End of Life) Bill England and Wales aligns with several of the Citizens' Jury key recommendations including:

- Limiting eligibility for assisted dying to people who have the mental capacity to make an informed and voluntary decision.
- Restricting assisted dying to those with terminal conditions.
- Mental illness should not, on its own, qualify as a condition for eligibility.
- Medical professionals should be involved throughout the process of assessing and supporting individuals seeking an assisted death.
- The need for increased funding to improve the quality and availability of NHS palliative care services.

Evidence from the Citizen's Jury has been cited by parliamentarians at various stages of this Bill and the Assisted Dying for Terminally Ill Adults (Scotland) Bill.

“I have been very influenced by the most careful study of public attitudes by the Nuffield Council on Bioethics, which included a sustained Citizens' Jury.

Lord David Willets, during Second Reading of the Terminally Ill Adults (End of Life) Bill in the House of Lords.

“The Nuffield Council on Bioethics have provided excellent and informative research on assisted dying, which has facilitated an important national conversation around a change in the law. I have engaged closely with that research while bringing forward my own Assisted Dying for Terminally Ill Adults (Scotland) Bill, and I extend my sincere thanks to the Nuffield Council for their work.

Liam McArthur MSP

Looking ahead



Danielle Hamm, Director



Professor Sarah Cunningham-Burley, Chair

When the Nuffield Council on Bioethics was founded in 1991, it filled a critical gap in the UK's ability to respond to the ethical implications of advances in biomedicine and health.

Our 35th anniversary presents us with a wonderful opportunity to reflect on how our work has continued to bring clarity, balance and thoughtful ethical analysis to many contested and complex areas of scientific progress in the years since.

The stories featured in this report are testament to how our work has helped shape national policy, supported responsible innovation, and fostered approaches to research and care that hold people's welfare, values and experiences at their core. They also show how independent ethical reflection and engaging widely with publics, experts, and practitioners can aid an understanding of how policies can be designed ethically to align scientific advancement with societal needs and expectations.

“ We are immensely proud of everything the NCOB has achieved, and would like to acknowledge the valuable contributions from all those who have worked with us over the years. We extend our sincere thanks to everyone who has helped the NCOB become the influential and respected body it is today – especially our funders the Nuffield Foundation, MRC and Wellcome.

The past two years have been a period of transformation for the NCOB as we have moved our focus more explicitly to serving the needs of decisions makers and adopted more agile ways of working under our **Making ethics matter** strategy.

Our work exploring public views on assisted dying could not have been more timely, as we expedited the publication of our findings to ensure that the evidence was available to those shaping landmark legislation. The strong interest in our timely review of stem-cell based embryo models as part of broader work on anticipatory governance during year one of this strategy has been reflected in requests to help shape the Government's Engineering Biology strategy and to contribute to agile governance pilots with the Medicines and Healthcare Products Regulatory Agency. This level of engagement underscores the ongoing importance of our independent, evidence-based work in shaping policy in fast-moving areas of science and innovation, a commitment we will carry forward in 2026 and beyond.

In our **reproduction, parenthood and families** priority area, our project on the 14-day rule for human embryo research will culminate in mid-2026. It will provide up-to-date independent ethical analysis, scientific evidence and deep understanding of public views to inform policymaking; helping to clarify what policy options look like, what the implications are, and what trade-offs they involve. Whilst there is no clear timeline for any legal reform in this area, our work will ensure that if and when that time comes, the evidence decision makers will need is available and readily accessible.

The upcoming publication of our report exploring the ethics of neural organoids will be a significant milestone in our **mind and brain** priority area. Throughout 2026 we will engage widely with stakeholders and decision makers to identify how our recommendations can be taken forward to ensure an ethical future for this research.

In the **environment and health** priority area we will engage with expert stakeholders in the UK and worldwide to inform our Solar Radiation Modification project and help us map current research activity. The first output from this project will be a rapid review that sets out and analyses SRM technologies, the possible health implications of their use, and the ethical issues raised by research and development. Our project will explore ethical considerations including the potential impact of this emerging technology on human and non-human species, as well as future generations.

As we look ahead to all of these publications, the world around us is changing. We are living through one of the most disruptive technological periods in history. Breakthroughs in areas like engineering biology, AI and quantum science offer exciting potential to tackle some of today's big challenges in health and medicine, but also create new uncertainty and risks, which raise urgent questions about fairness, accountability and societal impact.

We believe, by bringing ethical foresight into the innovation cycle early we can get ahead of these questions – helping to ensure governance keeps pace with scientific progress, appropriate safeguards are in place and innovation is directed towards fair and equitable outcomes. This is why our horizon-scanning, futures and foresight

work will remain central to our efforts and as we approach the mid-point of our five-year **strategy**, we will be taking stock – evaluating our operational effectiveness and asking whether our priority research areas need to change in 2027.

None of our achievements, nor our ambitions for the future, would be possible without our exceptional Council members, our dedicated Executive team, and the many partners, stakeholders and members of the public who strengthen our work. It is a privilege working with you all, thank you. Building on the impressive achievements of the NCOB to date, we look ahead to the next 35 years with confidence in our ability to make ethics matter – shaping decisions, guiding responsible innovation, and supporting a future in which advances in health and biomedicine benefit everyone.





Nuffield Council on Bioethics
100 St John Street
London
EC1M 4EH

 www.nuffieldbioethics.org

 bioethics@nuffieldbioethics.org

 [Nuffield Council on Bioethics](https://www.linkedin.com/company/nuffield-council-on-bioethics)