



Meeting Report NCad Stakeholder Event: ‘The transition to a society without animal experiments – a dialogue on direction and choices’

The fifth and final stakeholder meeting, which took place on 13 November 2025, was the closing event following four thematic consultations. The meeting included a recap of the previous consultations, a guest lecture, and panel discussions, aimed at furthering the dialogue on key aspects of the transition towards a society without animal experiments and at informing the NCad’s reflections on this transition through the exchange of stakeholder perspectives. The event was held in Utrecht with online participation. Online participants could submit questions via a Q&A, which were actively integrated into the discussion by the moderators Jan-Bas Prins and Shalenie den Braver. A total of 90 people attended in person and 61 participated online. Participants represented a broad range of organisations, including academia, industry, civil society organisations, and government bodies.

All input gathered during this event, as well as throughout the consultation process, will be considered in the next phase of developing the Transition Policy Advice 2.0.

Introduction and welcome

Participants were warmly welcomed by NCad Vice Chair Wim de Leeuw. Then the moderators Kees Le Blansch (bureau KLB) and Daan Schuurbijs (De Proeffabriek) outlined the programme and used Mentimeter questions both as an icebreaker and to gain insight into participants’ backgrounds and perspectives.

Looking back on four thematic stakeholder consultations

The meeting reflected on the four stakeholder consultations that preceded this closing event, which addressed:

- A: Ambitious, achievable goals (Utrecht, 25 September)
- B: Accelerating the transition to regulatory research without animal testing (online, 27 October)
- C: Dialogue on Values (Den Haag, 16 October)
- D: Science in Motion: the road to a science system free of animal testing (online, 9 October)

Reports of these stakeholder consultations are publicly available on the NCad website, providing further detail on the discussions held during each meeting. Drawing on their participation in the four stakeholder meetings, NCad members Roger Adan, Jeffrey Bajramovic, Reineke Hameleers, Katja ten Cate and Wim de Leeuw reflected on the different observations and emphases that had emerged in each setting. These ranged from the need to focus on factual and feasible options in emotionally charged debates, and the importance of careful wording and precise language, to recognising that the transition extends beyond technical solutions and requires broader changes in policy, funding and collaboration. NCad members also emphasised the importance of deliberately creating a safe and open setting for a dialogue on values, highlighting persistent challenges in research practice, such as the tendency to rely on animal models in funding decisions, scientific evaluation and publication practices, the challenges associated with the development of non-animal models for complex diseases, and the barriers to interdisciplinary cooperation.

Guest lecture Merel Talbi: on dialogue in a context of polarisation

As polarisation emerged as a recurring theme in earlier meetings, a guest lecture focused on dialogue in polarised contexts. The lecture explored how positions in polarised debates are often intertwined with values, identities, and emotions. It was also noted that the concept of polarisation

itself may be interpreted in different ways, and that these differing interpretations shape how debates and forms of disagreement are understood and addressed. The lecture emphasised that epistemic diversity can contribute to better outcomes, provided that different forms of knowledge are recognised and participants are able to listen to one another. It was further noted that polarisation is not inherently negative as an exclusive focus on consensus can sideline perspectives that differ from dominant views. Three approaches to supporting constructive dialogue in polarised settings were discussed: paying attention to personal experiences, designing physical spaces that facilitate dialogue, and making underlying assumptions explicit.

Following a lively discussion and a short break, the meeting continued with panel discussions structured around three themes.

Theme 1: Enabling implementation of New Approach Methodologies (NAMs)

This theme was explored through a panel discussion with experts from academia, industry, and other relevant domains, who participated in a personal capacity (panel members: Prof Dr Rachel Ankeny from the WUR, Dr Manon Beekhuijzen from Charles River and Dr Ans Punt from Unilever). The theme was introduced by NCad member Reineke Hameleers, who framed the discussion around three key elements for accelerating the uptake of New Approach Methodologies (NAMs): implementation in practice, the use of safe harbours or "safe spaces" to test and refine new approaches under real-world conditions, and shared learning to build confidence among scientists, regulators, and other stakeholders.

The panel discussion highlighted the need for practical settings in which new methods can be applied and refined transparently, without compromising scientific rigour, alongside formal validation routes. Such settings can support learning across scientific, industrial, and regulatory contexts. Throughout the discussion, both the panel and the audience drew attention to the gap between scientific development and regulatory application. Although progress is being made in the development of non-animal methods, translating these approaches into regulatory decision-making remains challenging. This highlights the importance of achieving a clearer mutual understanding between researchers and regulators.

Audience input showed considerable variation in experience of collaboration among these stakeholders: slightly under half reported such experience, while others had limited or no involvement. While many participants saw potential in shared learning initiatives, others expressed uncertainty. Conditions mentioned in this context included transparency, openness, clear communication, sufficient time, and formats that allow for experimentation and learning (safe spaces).

Discussion from the floor further highlighted practical and structural challenges, such as limited accessibility of existing infrastructures, the need for clearer strategies to combine multiple NAMs, legal and regulatory constraints, and the time and resources required for validation and acceptance.

Theme 2: Moral, scientific and practical considerations in the selection of research methods

The second theme was addressed through a panel discussion, which brought together experts in ethics, research practice, and ethical review. The experts participated in a personal capacity (panel members: Dr ir Nelleke Verhave (NVDEC), Dr Monique Janssens (Independent advisor and founder of Ethisch Bedrijf) and Prof Dr Judith Homberg (Radboud UMC)). The discussion focused on moral considerations in the selection of research methods, as well as on whether the interests of animals are being adequately considered.

Different perspectives emerged. It was noted that careful reflection on the necessity and justification of research, reduction of animal numbers, and minimisation of discomfort already takes place at an early stage of project design, after which formal assessment by ethics

committees follows. However, it was also highlighted that ethical assessment is shaped by legal frameworks which do not always align seamlessly with evolving ethical debates and scientific insights into animals and their capacities, and that there are options to do better than the minimal welfare requirements of legal frameworks. Regardless of their perspectives, participants recognised that the use of animals affects lives and that moral reflection arises at different points throughout the research process.

Audience responses reflected a clear diversity of views. When asked the same question, audience members expressed a range of positions, including agreement, disagreement, and uncertainty. The exchange was characterised by participants listening to and responding to one another's perspectives throughout the discussion.

Theme 3: Taking concrete steps and monitoring change in the reduction of animal research

The third theme was explored through a panel discussion involving experts from research, funding and policy, who participated in a personal capacity (panel members: Wim de Leeuw, MSc (NCad), Prof Dr Ilze Bot (Leiden Academic Centre for Drug Research, LACDR), Dr Martijn Nolte (Meer Kennis met Minder Dieren, ZonMW) and Dr Erica van Oort (Ministry of LVVN, Transitie Proefdiervrije Innovatie). Due to the scope of this theme, the panel discussion initially focused on the concept of target images as a tool to support tangible progress in specific research domains. It then expanded to encompass further opportunities for concrete steps and monitoring of change.

NCad member Wim de Leeuw introduced the rationale and process behind target images, as set out in the first Transition Policy Advice. Target images are intended to help define a direction towards reduced reliance on animal research by describing the current status of a domain, the models in use, the available alternatives, and what is needed to move forward. At present, four target images have been developed, covering neuroscience, cardiovascular diseases, immunology, and education and training. These differ substantially. An earlier survey suggested that they are generally considered useful, while also highlighting the need for stronger implementation support and clearer responsibilities.

The discussion then drew on practical experience of developing a target image in cardiovascular research to illustrate how combining different forms of expertise and stakeholder perspectives can inform decision making. Audience input focused on how the impact of target images could be strengthened. Suggestions included aligning with European initiatives, setting realistic targets, providing clear roadmaps and guidance and reflecting on the role of regulation and regulators in developing target images. It was noted that developing a target image for regulatory research may be relevant. It was also emphasised that, where suitable alternatives are not (yet) available, this should be explicitly acknowledged to avoid overpromising.

In the second part of the discussion, the focus of the panel broadened beyond target images to address additional opportunities to support change. Emphasis was placed on recognising areas without suitable NAMs to inform development priorities and funding decisions. The panel also identified opportunities to enhance research quality and transparency, such as clearer methodological reporting and practices such as preregistration. An overview of the current Dutch policy framework was presented, which is structured around three pillars: animal welfare, the Transition to Animal-Free Innovation programme (TPI, initiated in 2018 by the Ministry of LVVN, and the 'phasing out' of animal studies where possible. Contributions from the audience raised additional points, including concerns about terminology, such as the possible framing effects of the term 'phasing out', as well as questions about funding instruments and practical support for data storage and management in the context of method development and implementation.

Closing words

Participants were invited to provide any additional input via a follow-up survey. NCad chair Nico van Meeteren concluded the meeting by thanking all participants and contributors for their engagement throughout the consultation series.