



Meeting Report NCad Stakeholder Meeting on 'Ambitious, Achievable Goals'

On 25 September 2025 a diverse group of stakeholders attended the NCad Stakeholder Meeting on 'Ambitious, Achievable Goals' in meeting centre de Witte Vosch in Utrecht. This was the first in a series of five meetings held to gather input for the Transition Policy Advice 2.0 that the NCad is working towards. This first meeting brought together participants who had responded to an open survey held at the beginning of 2025, indicating that they would like to participate in a meeting on the feasibility of the end goal of a society without animal experiments. A total of 41 participants joined this meeting, and came from a broad spectrum of fields, from animal research to NAMs development and from regulation to animal ethics, ensuring that multiple perspectives were represented in the discussions. The day consisted of plenary discussion and subgroup sessions on this topic.

Introduction and welcome

After a brief introduction to the programme, NCad Vice Chair Wim de Leeuw explained how the stakeholder meetings are part of a broader consultation process in the run-up to the Transition Policy Advice 2.0. He noted that the meeting was intended to further explore the findings from the open survey earlier this year. He emphasised that the NCad's main goal was to listen carefully to the perspectives of stakeholders and to consider their input carefully in preparing the Transition Policy Advice 2.0. To support the stakeholder meetings and inform the wider public, the NCad had also provided a written explanation and an animation on the end goal¹.

Overview of arguments on animal experimentation: the Argument Map

As a background to the discussions, moderators Kees Le Blansch (bureau KLB) and Daan Schuurbijs (De Proeffabriek) provided a summary of the arguments put forward in the open survey earlier this year in the form of an argument map (see Appendix 1). Responses to the survey showed that the debate is not simply about being 'in favour of' or 'against' a society without animal experiments, but rather that there are many nuances in the responses and positions of stakeholders. The argument map aims to capture this variety in a 'landscape' of arguments grouped around four main themes: scientific research, ethics, legitimacy and strategy.

The map also had a specific function during the meeting: not only to confirm that the arguments brought forward in the survey have been heard by the NCad and will be taken into consideration in the preparation of the transition advice 2.0 – but also to move beyond the exchange of general arguments, and instead focus the discussion on concrete steps, dilemmas, constraints and conditions.

Participants confirmed that most of their arguments were represented on the map. One missing point concerned the possibility that the end goal may evolve over time as legislation changes, potentially changing the scope of the definition of animal procedures. Another participant observed that the map appeared somewhat biased toward barriers; while positive elements were included, they were less visible and existing achievements were not shown. It was acknowledged that the map reflected the input received through the survey, and therefore the balance of perspectives depended on who had responded. It was also remarked that the map represented opinions rather than arguments, suggesting the need for deeper exploration.

In the discussion of strategic arguments, some participants agreed that a realistic timeline can coexist with a realistic goal. Others recalled that the same ten-year timeline had already been set

¹ <https://english.ncadierproevenbeleid.nl/latest/news/2025/09/22/what-does-the-ncad-mean-by-a-society-without-animal-experiments>

decades ago and is still being referred to today. Another participant maintained that the end goal should not be defined, as doing so leads to polarisation.

Finally, participants emphasised the importance of clear terminology, noting that in public debate the terms animal testing with animal research are being used interchangeably. They suggested that using the directive's term "animal procedure" could help clarify this distinction, while recognising that environmental and animal protection studies are often not seen as such by the public.

Panel discussion: different views on ambitious, achievable goals from different fields of expertise

In the subsequent panel discussion, four panellists presented different views on ambitious, achievable goals from different fields of expertise. Dr Katja Wolthers (Amsterdam UMC) outlined feasible steps for the use of human organoid models in virology. Dr Koen Kramer (Utrecht University) gave his perspective from the field of animal ethics. Dr Laurens Witter (UMC Utrecht/Wilhelmina Kinderziekenhuis) presented his views on the use of animal experiments in the field of neuroscience. Prof Dr Majorie van Duursen (VU Amsterdam) gave a perspective from toxicology.

The panel discussion reflected both the diversity of research practices and the shared ambition to advance the transition. Panel members described different perspectives shaped by their fields: from those already working entirely without animal models to others who viewed animal research as, for now, still indispensable, particularly for research questions relating to the interaction between organ systems in disease and health that, in their view, cannot be studied without a whole organism. It was emphasized that differences between research domains are not merely practical but reflect limitations on the extent to which animal-free approaches can currently replace whole-organism research. At the same time, a counter-argument was made that even in such areas, progress is already being made towards alternative approaches. Across the research community, alongside scientific limitations, recognition and acceptance of alternative approaches remain a challenge, and change requires not only technical development but also a shift in mindset within the research community. While the process is complex and demanding, it was also described as engaging and encouraging: "never say never".

Views also differed on what kind of change is needed in the transition away from animal research. Some emphasised that progress requires not only scientific innovation but also a broader cultural and institutional shift: a willingness to question established practices, redefine validation, and build recognition for new approaches. Others focused more on ensuring reliability and safety before moving further away from animal research. Ethical considerations regarding this transition were interwoven throughout, with several participants noting that moving away from animal experiments is not automatically a win-win situation and can involve difficult choices between human and animal interests, as well as between innovation and safety.

The following discussion reflected both the questioning of existing assumptions and the search for concrete, science-driven next steps. Questions were raised about how the need for animal models is framed within the debate and how progress in the transition can be defined. The exchange moved from firm statements that certain areas cannot proceed without animal studies to counterexamples from other fields where what was once considered impossible later proved achievable. It was argued that scientific questions should guide the choice of models. The timing and nature of steps toward alternatives, ranging from direct application to exploratory and collaborative work, were seen to depend strongly on the field and purpose of the research. Views were expressed from different angles: some emphasising that animal models remain essential in specific contexts, others pointing to gradual but tangible progress.

In conclusion, participants and panellists valued the opportunity to exchange views across disciplines. The discussion illustrated how complex transitioning away from research with animals is, revealing both areas of convergence and differences in perspective.

Subgroup discussions: feasible steps, dilemmas, constraints and conditions for reducing or preventing animal research

After a short break, the participants discussed feasible steps, dilemmas, constraints and conditions for reducing or preventing animal research in subgroups. In a first quick, general round, each of the participants in turn provided their first answers to the following questions:

- a. Which steps for reducing or preventing animal research are possible in your field of expertise?
- b. What dilemmas and constraints make it difficult to take further steps?

Subsequently, the participants explored similarities and differences between their answers. To what extent did the discussion lead to consensual answers? To what extent did different subgroup members give different answers (which answers?), and why? Based on this exchange, they tried to identify / map out:

- a. Under what – more or less feasible – adjusted conditions could further steps be taken?
- b. What should NCad say about this in its transition advice 2.0?

NCad members took notes. Although the topics and emphasis varied, several overarching themes emerged.

Across the groups, participants highlighted the need for differentiation between research domains and cautioned against generalisations about the (im)possibilities of replacing animal studies. Many underlined that careful formulation, mutual understanding and sensitivity in public communication can help avoid unnecessary polarisation and strengthen collaboration between researchers working with animal models and those developing New Approach Methodologies (NAMs).

Ethical reflection was a recurring topic, including the balance between human and animal interests and the importance of open communication about research practices, progress, and limitations. Participants also noted practical challenges: limited funding and data access, the need for validated alternatives, and regulatory or procedural barriers such as data protection rules and publication requirements.

Several groups emphasised that, where full replacement is not yet feasible, there remains considerable scope for refinement and reduction. Broader investment in validation, harmonised regulation, and better infrastructure for sharing both human and non-animal data were mentioned as priorities. Participants also noted the role of policy, funders, and journals in supporting the transition, for example through clearer ethical review criteria, funding for validation work, and removing institutional obstacles.

Presentation and Mentimeter-session: monitoring the transition

Dr Aldert Hanemaaijer from PBL Netherlands Environmental Assessment Agency gave a presentation on monitoring the transition towards a circular economy. The main message of his presentation was that monitoring a transition requires mapping of both output indicators (in the case of animal research: numbers of animals used) and process indicators (that focus on changing preconditions). Dr Hanemaaijer focused specifically on the challenges in choosing such indicators, providing explanations and enabling steering. After this presentation, the audience shared their ideas for monitoring the transition towards a society without animal research by way of a Mentimeter-session. In this session, all participants agreed to a certain extent that monitoring of developments in animal research is important. Respondents suggested a wide range of potential and measurable transition indicators, covering both quantitative metrics (e.g. animal use, NAM adoption, funding, preregistration) and qualitative aspects (e.g. policies, governance, attitudes, acceptance). Furthermore, respondents emphasized that indicators of the development towards 'better science' reflect research quality and integrity, such as reproducibility, preregistration, open science, and refinement of animal studies.

Take-home messages and closing statements

In the final session, panel members, Dr Aldert Hanemaaijer and NCad Vice Chair Wim de Leeuw shared their observations on the discussions throughout the day. Panel members expressed

appreciation for the open and constructive atmosphere of the meeting. The discussion was seen as a valuable step forward, acknowledging both the progress made and the distance still to be covered. There was broad agreement on the importance of maintaining dialogue and distinguishing between developing new methods and phasing out animal studies, as both require time and recognition. The meeting underscored that ambitious goals are achievable when pursued through collaboration, reflection, and continued exchange. At the same time, the discussions made clear that substantial differences in perspective and structural challenges continue to shape the pace and direction of the transition.

In his closing remarks, the vice chair described the meeting as a fruitful and inspiring exchange. Acknowledging that change can be challenging, he highlighted that innovation lies at the core of research: scientists make possible what today still seems impossible, also in this field. He urged participants to stay connected and engage in dialogue and discussion, both within and across disciplines. The vice chair also emphasised the need to broaden and deepen the ethical debate, addressing not only the interests of animals but also the role of human-based research and the difficult choices that come with phasing out animal experiments.

Appendix 1 – Argument map on animal experimentation

This argument map visualises the variety of arguments gathered through [a survey held in 2025](#). The map presents the landscape of arguments on animal experimentation, centred around four main groups of arguments regarding scientific research, ethics, legitimacy and strategy, illustrating the diversity of perspectives.

