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Amanda Solloway MP

Parliamentary Under Secretary of State
Minister for Science, Research and Innovation
Department for Business, Energy & Industrial Strategy
1 Victoria Street
Westminster
London, SW1H 0ET

Dear Minister,

The coronavirus pandemic continues to have an unprecedented and severe impact on the UK research base, including our own research community within neuroscience. At the British Neuroscience Association, we have actively sought views from both within and outside of our membership on the impact that this is having on neuroscience research, and wish to raise with you some of the concerns expressed by UK neuroscientists, and ask for your intervention on specific issues that we highlight below.

The immediate impact on neuroscience

Across the UK, research facilities have been closed, experimental work has ceased, and nearly all researchers across the career spectrum have been working from home – only 3% that responded to our survey between 19 May and 10 June were able to work at an onsite location, and 88% indicated that there had been an overall negative impact, highlighting the scale of neuroscience research affected.

Neuroscience research is essential to both our understanding of disorders of the brain and to the translation of this understanding into new therapies and biomarkers. A direct negative impact of the lockdown has been felt by neuroscientists on the collection of research data, central to helping increase that understanding, with 92% affected. Many have as a result had to severely limit their work to data analysis, and to writing – though researchers with children have also highlighted to us that increased childcare responsibilities brought about by the lockdown have impacted on their capacity to do so.

Getting existing research projects back on track: Research staff

There are worrying levels of confidence around whether neuroscientists' working environments are ready for them to return to their research. 67% are concerned about the lack of guidance from their employer about returning to work, and 77% concerned about the preparedness of their workplaces.

In your letter to the research sector on 23 March you highlighted that some researchers affected would be concerned about being able to deliver their projects and about their employment status where research projects may not complete due to the delay.

We also note that on 5 June the Government published revised guidance to research organisations on the use of the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme to furlough research staff. While this is welcome, we note that this gave research organisations, grant holders and early career researchers only three working days in which to make arrangements. **We ask that you consider how BEIS might offer additional support to staff who were unable to be included within this before the deadline.**

Getting existing research projects back on track : Laboratory materials

Just after lockdown, we highlighted the catastrophic impact of the sudden closure of research facilities, including the loss of research materials such as rare cell lines and reagents, and biological models that can take months or years to develop. Replacement will require resources. Around 80% of survey respondents were concerned that insufficient funding will prevent the salvaging their research programmes after the lockdown. Over a quarter of researchers in our survey indicated they have had to request further support from their funders, but many had so far received no reassurances.

We welcome the BEIS recent announcement on the Government's research budget allocations for this financial year, and the commitment to bring forward some of funding previously announced in the Spring Budget. **As part of this, we ask that BEIS provides clear details on how it will support researchers in efforts to salvage their research programmes.**

Longer term impact on the neuroscience sector

However, we are greatly concerned about the long-term effects of the lockdown on neuroscience research and believe that there is still a need for further reassurances to retain the highly-skilled neuroscience research community. 32% of researchers in our survey are considering leaving neuroscience research as a direct result of COVID-19. This would have a severely detrimental effect on developing the UK's next generation of neuroscientists, and significantly hinder future efforts to further our understanding of disorders of the brain and develop new therapies. **We therefore ask that BEIS examines how it can do more to incentivise early career researchers to remain in research.**

Reassuring the neuroscience research community

At a time where the research sector would greatly welcome further reassurance, we would like to reiterate the importance to the neuroscience research community of UK involvement within Horizon Europe. International collaboration is vital to advance neuroscience research. Both UK and European neuroscience benefits from working together, and it is essential that in the future the UK remains closely associated with European research and innovation programmes such as Horizon Europe.

Yours sincerely,

Professor Annette Dolphin FRS FMedSci (President)

Professor Richard Henson (President-Elect)

Professor Stafford Lightman FRS FMedSci (Past President)

Professor Catherine Harmer (Treasurer)

Professor Narender Ramnani (Trustee for Research Policy)

The British Neuroscience Association is the largest professional body representing neuroscientists in the UK, and one of longest-running neuroscience organisations in the world. For more information please see www.bna.org.uk.