

## The School of the Biological Sciences

### Confirmed Minutes of the First SBS IT Committee Meeting held on Wednesday 28 October 2015 at 10.00am, Sainsbury Laboratory Board Room

**Present:** Nabeel Affara (Chair), Jenny Barna (SBS/UIS/Biochemistry), Richard Bartlett (Clinical School Computing Service), Martin Bellamy (Director of UIS), Paul Bertone (Stem Cell Institute), Philip Brereton (Pathology), Paul Browne (Systems Biology), Ian Clark (Genetics), Alastair Downie (Gurdon Institute), Jessica Dunne (Secretary), Richard Farndale (Biochemistry), Christopher Gilligan (Plant Sciences), Mark Holmes (Veterinary Medicine), Marko Hyvonen (Biochemistry), Steve Russell (Genetics), Gabriella Rustici, (Bioinformatics Training Facility), Christoph Schwiening (PDN), Derek Smith (Chair of the SBS Computing Review Committee, Zoology), Paul Sumption (Stem Cell Institute), Felicity Webster (SBS Finance Manager).

Apologies for absence: Brian Hendrich, Henrik Jönsson, Andrew Welchman

No conflicts of interest were declared; the apologies were noted and guests welcomed to the meeting.

**1)** The Chair opened the meeting by thanking members for attending and declared the remit of the Committee: To monitor developments in IT, the changing needs of the departments and the Biological Sciences and to recommend to Council the implementation of appropriate strategic and operational solutions.

**2) Development of SBS IT Provision (Paper 1.1)**

The Chair outlined the current position of IT services in the School of the Biological Sciences (SBS) and provided a brief history of the SBS Computing Review which led to a project to develop a proposal for a Joint Schools Computing Service (JSCS) to service both SBS and the School of Clinical Medicine (SCM). The Chair urged the Committee to consider the options – proceed with the JSCS, an alternative University Information Services (UIS) model or both where departments select what suits their needs best – and focus on delivery, service quality and long-term solutions. The proposed JSCS is intended to provide a cross-department and cross-school service that will complement the infrastructure services provided by UIS. Representatives from the Departments of Biochemistry (+Systems Biology), Zoology, Plant Sciences (+ Sainsbury Laboratory), Genetics, Psychology and the Stem Cell Institute are part of the JSCS scoping exercise initiated in 2014.

**i) Update on the JSCS project:** Professor Derek Smith (DS) explained to the Committee that he had recommended the formation of the SBS IT Committee to Council (following a decision of the Review Committee at its meeting in April 2015) to enable the currently out-of-scope departments (The Gurdon Institute, Pathology, Pharmacology, PDN, UBSS, School Offices and the Vet School) to gain better insight into the JSCS project, and to be a forum for school-wide computing issues. Richard Bartlett (RB) delivered a formal presentation in which he stated that the JSCS is intended to complement infrastructure services offered by the UIS, meet the IT needs of all participating departments and deliver a catalogue of services from which departments can

select according to specific requirements and finances. RB confirmed that the JSCS project was on target (to report by December 2016) following a series of JSCS Requirements and Design workshops held in August 2015 (attended by representatives from SBS and SCM). The workshops were designed to facilitate stakeholder engagement and accelerate the JSCS requirements gathering exercise. The JSCS proposal and service catalogue has been reviewed and revised by the JSCS Technical Team and Steering Group in light of the information gathered from the workshops. It was not clear to what extent this assembly of desired services overlapped with what was already available from UIS or how this might change with the rapid restructuring, service development and integration of IT provision across all schools that is currently proceeding within UIS.

RB outlined the JSCS External Review plans and confirmed that Dr. Ian Wild (Director of Programme and Project Delivery, Oxford), Dr. Bryan Solomon (Head of Project Delivery Services, UCL) and Dr. Alan Blackwell (Computer Laboratory, Cambridge) have agreed to review the project management methodology and the JSCS services, technical design and implementation plan. Each review will be split into three phases; the first review is scheduled to take place when the service catalogue has been drafted and the second review will be conducted at the end of the technical design phase. It is anticipated that the JSCS proposal will be submitted to the Councils of SBS and SCM in January 2017.

The Chair asked what added value would accrue from an “additional layer” of IT service provision (in the form of JSCS). RB reiterated that the JSCS is intended to complement UIS core services and provide specialist local expertise. All JSCS services will be included in the University IT Service Catalogue as either core services (available to all) or local services (available across SBS and SCM). A partnership between JSCS and UIS will benefit stakeholders and should lead to improvements in IT services and future sustainability. A wider discussion dominated by members of the JSCS scoping group ensued and it was agreed that a partnership between UIS and JSCS would be important (to avoid duplication of services) should the JSCS proposal become reality.

**ii) UIS Restructure and delivery to institutions:** Dr. Martin Bellamy (MB) provided an update on the UIS restructure and outlined the UIS’ objectives to increase Information Services’ contribution to the University’s mission through a focus on: users, services, ways of working and people. MB stated that local IT support is an essential requirement of University IT service provision. Users need to feel empowered and in control. The *beta* prototype for the UIS Service Catalogue provides IT service information to support teaching, learning, research and administration. The new UIS initiatives currently in train are the Service Catalogue, Research computing pilot and BioCloud, Microsoft Enterprise Agreement and Storage Strategy. The Strategic review of University business systems and Digital education strategy are underway. MB concluded that Schools need local expertise and that UIS and JSCS should work in partnership.

**iii) Update on the BioCloud initiative:** Dr. Jenny Barna (JB) provided an update on developments with High Performance Computing (HPC) and data storage that will be available to SBS - the provision of large data (multi-terabyte) storage facilities either directly connected to the High Performance Computing cluster or standalone for all research groups in any institution within

the University. Computer Officers will be able to assist PIs with the transfer of large datasets to the BioCloud.

**iv) Discussion of options in Paper 1.1:** The Vet School elected to have its IT needs provided by UIS and Mark Holmes (MH) provided the Committee with his knowledge of the Vet School's positive UIS interaction which he described as a "no brainer" option. MH stated that research collaboration should drive service requirements (not resource/equipment) during the project requirements phase. Christopher Gilligan (CG) noted the polarisation of views and stated the importance of commonality at this critical point. CG added that the JSCS initiative should continue and that members are positive about what is envisioned. DS commented that SBS and SCM have commonality through the JSCS project objectives and advised that out-of-scope departments should decide which option is best suited to requirements. DS claimed that the evidence suggests that the JSCS project has delivered contrary to the view outlined in Paper 1.1, but without answering the basic operational questions posited in the paper and restated by the chair during the meeting. DS expressed his view that all SBS departments need to engage fully for a successful outcome. Alastair Downie pressed Derek Smith to clarify whether his intention was to force all departments and institutes to receive their local IT provision from the potential JSCS. DS did not give an unequivocal response. In view of this, Christoph Schwiening (PDN) suggested that out-of-scope departments should be asked to provide a position statement with respect to the JSCS proposal for circulation prior to the meeting in January 2016. It was agreed that further updates on the JSCS proposal, developments at UIS and the BioCloud initiative should be on the agenda for the next meeting. DS suggested that MB and RB should attend the next committee meeting.

- 3) AOB: None
- 4) Date of next meeting: the Committee will meet in January 2016.