

MEDICAL RESEARCH COUNCIL



03

Trade Union Access: in part

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Minutes of the Council Business meeting, held via zoom videoconference, on 13 October 2020

Attendees		
MRC Council	Management Board	MRC Head Office
Fiona Watt	Rob Buckle	Rachel Benny
John Brown	Hugh Dunlop	Simone Bryan
Roger Highfield	Frances Rawle	
Precious Lunga	Susan Simon	Guests
Richard Murley	Glenn Wells	Sarah Collinge (item 9)
Jill Pell		Dame Ottoline Leyser (item 6)
Munir Pirmohamed	Apologies	Joanna Robinson (item 10)
Eleanor Riley	Kim Graham	
Graham Spittle		Observers
Irene Tracey		Rebecca Barlow (item 8)
Pauline Williams		Heike Weber (item 5)
Louise Wood		

1. Welcome and Apologies

The Council business meeting was held via Zoom videoconference.

Professor Fiona Watt welcomed everyone to the meeting. Apologies were received from Kim Graham, Mr Richard Murley joined and chaired the meeting from item three onwards. John Iredale joined the meeting from item five. Eleanor Riley joined from item five and left before item nine, Charlotte Watts also joined from item five. Roger Highfield left the meeting during item six.

Professor Watt updated Council with announcements of the Queen's Birthday honours which had recognised the excellent work done by MRC funded researchers and staff in MRC head office to support the UK's COVID-19 response. Dr Sarah McDonald awarded an OBE for services to NHS during COVID-19; Professor Emma Thomson, OBE for services to NHS during COVID-19; Professor Stephen Holgate awarded a knighthood for services to medical research; Professor Cathie Sudlow, director of BHF data science centre awarded an OBE; Professor Callum Semple awarded an OBE for services to COVID response; Dr Giles Yeo awarded an MBE for services to communication and research engagement; Professor Graham Medley, awarded an MBE for services to infectious disease control and Dr Jonathan Pearce awarded an MBE for services to COVID research.

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Professor Watt congratulated the awardees and acknowledged the excellent work that had been done by a team of Head Office staff to enable the rapid delivery of activities to fund research to understand, prevent, treat and control COVID-19.

2. Register of declared interests

Professor Watt asked members to send any updated declarations to the secretariat.

3. Minutes of the joint Strategy Board and Council meeting held on 9 July and the Council business meeting held on 10 July 2020

The minutes of the joint Strategy Board and Council meeting held on 9 July were approved as an accurate record of the meeting.

The minutes of the Council business meeting held on 10 July 2020 were approved as an accurate record of the meeting.

3b. Matters Arising

3b. Quarterly Operations Update

Members noted the quarterly operations dashboard update.

Update on Charity Funding

Mr Murley updated Council on the letter from members to the UKRI board highlighting the significant financial risk to MRC's key strategic investments funded in partnership with medical research charities. A meeting with Dame Ottoline and Sir John Kingman was scheduled for the following week and an update would be provided to council at their next meeting in December.

Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) update

In their meeting in July 2020, members requested further information about the impact of the pandemic on female staff and MRC's response to the Black Lives Matter movement. Dr Frances Rawle highlighted to members the EDI update in paper 15. The UKRI HR team was planning to undertake a full UKRI-wide equal pay audit before the end of the year to help further understand the drivers of the gender pay gap and to identify any effect of ethnicity or other possible issues. Since March UKRI staff have been encouraged to take special leave when necessary for caring responsibilities related to the pandemic and four COVID-related codes have been introduced to the absence recording system to allow the impact of the pandemic to be monitored (COVID-19 related issue or disruption, quarantine/self-isolation, COVID-19 related caring responsibilities and COVID-19 sickness) and HR and senior UKRI management have been monitoring the data regularly, including any differences by sex. The MRC data up to the summer show that female staff recorded noticeably more time off than male for two of the categories, caring responsibilities and sickness, while male staff have recorded somewhat more time off due to COVID-related disruption and quarantine/self-isolation.

Professor Watt updated members on recent activity in MRC head office and UKRI since the publication of the UKRI statement in response to the Black Lives Matter movement. There have been four virtual interactive 'Town Hall' meetings for UKRI staff to explore what the Black Lives Matter statement means for staff and UKRI's work, and the MRC also held an online workshop for staff on 8th September entitled "How to advocate for an inclusive working space". All events have been well attended. The MRC had planned recruitment for a new role with responsibility for Equality, Diversity and Inclusion.

4. Finance Report

Mr Hugh Dunlop, MRC Chief Finance and Operating Officer, updated Council on the annual forecast outturn, additional funding for World Class Labs and the year-to-date result to end of August 2020. Overall forecast net expenditure was 0.02% below budget, however there had been some significant movements between ringfences and categories as a result of COVID-19 impact, primarily within; the budget for core R&D (0.5% under budget) as a result of £3m under on fellowship extensions and the Clinical Academic Research Partnership scheme being delayed as a result of COVID-19; Net £0.1m under budget on COVID-19 awards that are being funded by UKRI; and ODA (4.7% over budget) due to GCRF where there is additional spend on Covid-19 awards. The Francis Crick Institute and the Dementia Research Institute have signalled issues both in-year and medium term. The medium-term issues cannot be accommodated within in-year support. Further analysis of the medium term is ongoing and will be shared with Council in December.

An uplift to the budget of c£70m had been received which included funding for COVID-19 research, virements and inflation. Pressures identified included potential support for MRC Institutes to underpin strategic investments, seed funding for spending review ambitions and targeted support for high priority existing research grants not supported through existing UKRI COVID-19 support mechanisms. UKRI Executive Committee had endorsed the recommendation of the £300m World Class Labs expansion, to fund each Council's top three priorities at a minimum level. MRC was allocated £29m additional funding which had been allocated to fund key equipment, digital infrastructure and equipment for COVID response within MRC Institutes, Units and Centres.

Members noted the update and it was confirmed information relating to the digital infrastructure funded at MRC Institutes, Units and Centres would be shared with MRC's Data Science Advisory Group.

5. CSR update

Dr Glenn Wells introduced this item and provided Council with an overview on the 2020 Comprehensive Spending Review (CSR) plans and timeline. UKRI submitted its initial CSR proposal to the Department for Business, Energy, and Industrial Strategy (BEIS) at the end of August, outlining how UKRI will deliver against the objectives in the government's R&D roadmap. This submission was a high-level bid taking account of the Council submissions made in May 2019 (into which MRC Council and Strategy Board members gave their input) and incorporating major new developments. UKRI and Councils would need to be prepared to respond to challenges from BEIS on priorities in different CSR scenarios and fallback positions, including the possibility of a one-year roll over. In parallel with the overall Spending Review process, UKRI would also need to develop its process for allocations of budgets across UKRI Councils once the overall R&D/UKRI budgets were known.

Executive Chairs had worked together on developing thematic priority areas that reach across Councils. The priority themes; Transformative Technologies' Clean Environment, National security, COVID-19, Health, Ageing, and Well-being, and Inequalities had been captured in the UKRI bid under bottom up and challenge-led collaborations. The MRC Executive Chair has led the development of the Health, Ageing and Wellbeing goal which was being further refined to strengthen the pitch for the CSR. MRC had also started to set out headline investments for the Spending Review period, which were akin to the "announcables" that had previously been developed, and constitute large, visible investments that could be compelling to Government and the public

The importance of language used in the top-level messages for capturing the attention of government was highlighted by members and questions were asked about how UKRI was working with government to ensure details of bids were clear and distinct from bids from other parts of BEIS. It was confirmed that UKRI bids were focussed on specific areas of investment and Dame Ottoline was having frequent meetings with No10. UKRI was engaged in ongoing dialogue with senior officials in BEIS about detail within bids.

6. Update from Dame Ottoline Leyser

Council members welcomed Dame Ottoline Leyser to the meeting. Dame Ottoline gave a short opening statement and took questions from members.

In her opening remarks, Dame Ottoline outlined the role of UKRI as steward of the research and innovation ecosystem, responsible for supporting the health of the research base and embedding an ethos of connectivity so that the system as a whole becomes less fragmented and balkanised. The formation of UKRI had created many opportunities, particularly with regards to increasing interdisciplinary research, and the provision of cross-cutting activities that benefit from being delivered in a co-ordinated way. Activities included supporting talent, talent flow and mobility, delivering the place agenda, international collaboration and investment in infrastructure that harnesses the benefits of widely applicable transformative capabilities such as artificial intelligence. Furthermore, cross cutting activities could catalyse increased collaboration, through the ability to bring together the right people with the right expertise both to deliver bottom-up interdisciplinary research, and to tackle top-down national and global challenges such as climate change and healthy ageing. Both bottom-up and top-down approaches would be needed to capture the benefits of interdisciplinary and collaborative research.

The role of individual Councils within UKRI and the importance of engagement with, and understanding of, their respective research communities and wider stakeholder communities (industrial, policy and third-sector partners) was emphasised. There existed a very vibrant sector and rich ecosystem in biomedical sciences, of which MRC had a deep understanding both in the UK and internationally. Collective intelligence across UKRI's remit put the organisation in a strong position to steward the research and innovation system and help to enhance the performance of the system as a whole. A deep understanding of the research and innovation sector, synergy between Research Councils combined with coordinated cross cutting activities created a unique opportunity to work closely with the UK government to ensure knowledge and expertise was fed into policy making, and for UKRI to become the delivery partner of choice. The government's commitment to, and ambition for, research and innovation in the UK's future prosperity had been set out in the recently published R&D Roadmap. A whole-systems approach would be vital to realise the ambition of the Roadmap and working collaboratively with other government departments to support delivery of research would be critical for this, as would recognition of the full breadth of skills and experience needed for the UK's research and innovation system to prosper.

Council thanked Dame Ottoline for her opening remarks and asked a number of questions on these issues. Members questioned the governance model of UKRI with respect to the role of individual Councils and the extent of their autonomy. Dame Ottoline commented that UKRI was a large and complex organisation that was still relatively new. It was confirmed that individual Councils of UKRI would retain their own Boards as they are responsible for making decisions on scientific, research and innovation matters within their disciplines, and importantly for fostering relationships and engagement with their own communities to understand future opportunities and needs. Individual Councils would be empowered to partner and invest their resources in the most effective way. The UKRI Board was responsible for the interface with government, accountable to parliament through BEIS, rather than determining MRC's role within the landscape or MRC's priorities and relationships with its community.

Members wanted to better understand how UKRI should be organisationally structured to deliver its functions most effectively. Dame Ottoline highlighted that UKRI was still a relatively young organisation and that the structure was still evolving. Significant resource was needed to effectively underpin deep understanding and effective engagement with research and innovation communities across the entire remit of UKRI and given this, it was unrealistic to expect UKRI to realise efficiency savings. The increased focus on greater interdisciplinarity and cross-UKRI working, and working with industry and Government Departments, brought with it a need to be more outward facing with more engagement with external stakeholders. The challenge was ensuring that the structure of the organisation allowed this activity to happen in the most effective way, that people delivering these functions were valued and that communication flowed well between the constituent parts of UKRI. It

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was confirmed there was no requirement for uniformity in general across Research Councils, but there was an imperative to understand how and why things were done differently across the Research Councils, to share best practice and to align processes where there was no clear rationale for difference.

Questions were asked as about how UKRI could address systemic issues with research culture and achieve equality, diversity and inclusion in research and innovation. Dame Ottoline commented that effective research and innovation needed to bring together different people with different expertise, experiences, approaches and different ways of thinking. UKRI had a responsibility to promote a positive research culture and increase diversity of its research portfolio and the researchers it funds, by supporting a range of career paths and a diversity of experience and achievements. UKRI's ability to make high quality decisions about how the system works and who participates would enhance the performance of the research and innovation system and help to catalyse systemic change. The Research Excellence Framework exercise offered a major opportunity to drive change and increase the emphasis on careers and research culture, to ensure that the breadth and diversity of roles contributing to research are recognised, valued and supported.

Council expressed disappointment that there was little visibility of MRC's contribution to the national effort to tackle the COVID-19 pandemic. Dame Ottoline commented that it was important to highlight within communications the role of individual Councils, and when announcements were made, to make individual Council contributions clear. While it was important for UKRI to be recognised for its role in supporting the health of the research base, the work of individual Councils needed to be acknowledged and appropriately branded. This was particularly important for Council's relationships with their communities and UKRI's communications activities needed to reflect this.

7. COVID-19 Business Continuity Update

This item was discussed before item 6.

Professor Watt, MRC Chief Executive and Mr Dunlop, Chief Finance and Operating Officer updated Council on MRC's COVID-19 business continuity activity.

A recent delivery and risk report from MRC institutes highlighted impacts on business continuity which included availability of PPE. Currently it was still possible to procure PPE, but there was high demand and timelines for procurement were lengthening. There was staff time lost as staff were taking special leave due to additional caring responsibilities or the need to self-isolate, particularly affecting the Harwell site which was at about 25% capacity. LMS and LMB had about 85% of staff returning to site. All Institutes had reported difficulties in accessing COVID-19 testing which in turn was impacting staff ability to return to work if absent due to self-isolation. LMS had secured provision of testing through Imperial College, but it was noted that this provision may decrease given the start of the academic year and the need to prioritise testing for students.

The London Head Offices were officially closed, but there were plans to reopen to support a limited number of individuals with the most pressing needs, who are unable to work from home. Work environments had been made 'COVID-safe' with a limited number of desks in use to adhere to social distancing rules, hand sanitising stations and good signage. The Swindon Offices would remain open and desks continued to be reserved for use by those with the most pressing need. There were plans to open both the Swindon and London meeting room space for important collaborative working only, but this would depend on the Government's three tier system.

Dr Rob Buckle, Chief Science Officer updated members on UKRI's grant extension allocation for organisations to sustain UKRI grant-funded research and fellowships affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, which would run until spring 2021. Organisations will have the flexibility to target these funds towards research projects that are disrupted to ensure research can be completed. MRC was undertaking financial modelling to explore how COVID-19 impacted studies could be supported beyond spring 2021.

8. COVID lessons learned

Dr Glenn Wells introduced this item and provided Council with a summary of the initial report of the MRC's COVID-19 "Lessons Learnt" project, which was commissioned by MRC's Management Board in May 2020.

In response to the current pandemic the MRC, and UKRI as a whole, responded rapidly to support research on COVID-19. Actions ranging from operational changes across the office to establishing new funding calls were implemented quickly. The initial Lessons Learnt report aimed to provide an objective review of actions taken, to identify areas where processes and ways of working could be improved, and to identify any positive new practices or ways of working which could be incorporated into current MRC structures and business as usual activities. The report was informed by internal intelligence gathered throughout May and June, including interviews with MRC Head Office staff. The report examined challenges and missed opportunities, as well as positive outcomes across four main categories; operations (staffing and resourcing, and the delivery and prioritisation of BAU and COVID-19 related activities); funding (new mechanisms initiated for funding COVID-19 research, ongoing response mode activities, and the management of current MRC awards and studentship); research (identifying and addressing gaps in the COVID-19 research landscape); and communications (MRC's internal and external communications to staff and the research community). The report had identified several opportunities to improve processes, ways of working across the office and organisational resilience. Lessons learned from the peer review mechanism implemented during the rapid response call would be fed into the Reforming our Business initiative.

Council acknowledged and praised the hard work of the head office team in delivery of the rapid response activities, particularly the Infections and Immunity team. Members emphasised the need for MRC to adopt the positive aspects of lessons learned into new ways of working, particularly considering the benefits for environmental sustainability and flexible working, and to also consider the risks of charity co-funding in business as usual activities. Members commented it would be useful to understand impacts on staff and research within research institutes, particularly how reduced time spent within the laboratory had impacted on the focus of experimental work and whether there had been specific impacts on creativity and communication flow between colleagues, especially for post-doctoral researchers and junior principal investigators. It was noted how the pandemic had exacerbated pre-existing problems with equality, diversity and inclusion within the research and innovation system and had particularly impacted early career researchers and junior principal investigators with caring responsibilities, and those from ethnic minority backgrounds.

It was agreed an action plan would be presented by MRC's Management Board to Council at a future meeting.

9. Science Commitment Budget

Dr Sarah Collinge presented Council with preliminary information on the 2021/22 science commitment budget planning. The commitment budget represented MRC's 'business as usual' funding distributed through its regular and repeating funding schemes. There were three opportunities each year for Council to oversee planning of budgets for commitment to new research and provide advice, with this being the first. In this first commitment planning discussion, Council would normally consider, at a high-level, how to distribute the available commitment budget and how to balance investment across areas, however, there was a high level of uncertainty in planning for 2021/22 budgets, including the outcome of the spending review, impact of COVID-19 on the existing research portfolio and on the charity sector, and future UK access to EU funding schemes. The commitment plan for the current year had held up well, despite the disruption experienced and remained a valid template for the year ahead. In this plan Council had prioritised investment in Training and Translation, while wishing to maintain consistent support for response-mode grants. Almost all funding activities planned for 2020/21 had been launched and MRC Head Office had continued to operate assessment and funding decisions. This meant that commitments were being made as usual and over a third of the budget had been committed to date, as expected for this point in the year. Any small adjustments that might be required over the remainder of the year would be considered by Management Board. Additional

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unplanned investments in COVID-19 research were in most cases secured through UKRI budgets so MRC's own commitment budget had not been significantly impacted as yet.

A one-year roll-over of budget was becoming increasingly likely. This would leave very little scope to modify the balance of investment without disrupting business as usual. There was a need to plan for the MRC's Strategy Board budget to increase to reflect the high demands of institute reviews scheduled in 2021/22, including the next phases of investment into the LMB and the Francis Crick Institute. A favourable spending review outcome could provide considerably more flexibility and options for Council to consider.

Questions were asked about financial modelling of impacts on the budget, including pressures on charity co-funding. It was confirmed that there was no expectation for MRC to cover the shortfall in charity co-funding. The Francis Crick Institute and the UK Dementia Research Institute (UK DRI) relied upon significant charity contributions which were at risk, but were at different stages of establishment and as such there were differences in outcomes of potential impact on finances. At present, no funding gap had been forecast for the Crick, which had established a steady state in terms of its operations and had more flexibility to adjust its operations in response to financial impacts. The UK DRI was still establishing appropriate operational and organisational structures and was in a growth trajectory with ongoing recruitment, and the COVID-19 crisis had critically impacted on the fund-raising capabilities of the UK DRI's charitable founders.

Council questioned the impact of the UK's exit from the EU without a deal and the impact on MRC funding schemes if future UK access to EU funding schemes was restricted. It was confirmed that there were multiple options being considered at UKRI level for different support packages to provide financial support to cover potential loss of access to EU funding schemes. Council noted the high uncertainty and agreed that this should be considered further at the December meeting when the commitment budget available for 2021/22 (and beyond) should be more certain and realistic planning could be undertaken.

10. Update on MRC Harwell

Dr Joanna Robinson updated Council on the on progress of the change management process at MRC Harwell and the appointment of a director for the new National Mouse Genetics Network. By way of background, Dr Robinson summarised Council's decision in December 2019 to re-shape MRC's investment at MRC Harwell, creating a national network of challenge-led clusters under national leadership with close alignment to the Mary Lyon Centre as a national facility, and to close the Mammalian Genetics Unit (MGU) in March 2022. The outcome had been communicated to staff at MRC Harwell immediately with an all-staff event held in January 2020. Since that time, there had been a number of staff engagement events with, and opportunities for, PhDs, post-doctoral researchers and Principal Investigators. Transfer packages had been put in place to support group leaders wishing to relocate their research and team to alternative host institutions, or to transition to the new funding structures.

Following an open international search, Professor Owen Sansom (University of Glasgow) had been appointed as the Director of the new national mouse genetics network and took up his role on 1 October. Professor Sansom was a world-leading scientist using and developing mouse models of cancer and brought a strong vision of how to establish collaborative networks of mouse geneticists, investigators of human disease and clinicians to develop, validate and utilize more targeted models. An initial focus for the Director would be further engagement with the scientific community ahead of a call for research cluster proposals in early 2021. Professor Paul Kaye, Chair of MRC's Infections and Immunity Board, would chair the Network's Oversight Board.

Council welcomed the update and acknowledged the work so far to support the transition. Members recognised the impact that Council's decision to reshape MRC's investment would have on Harwell staff and supported the continuation of MRC head office working closely with Harwell leadership and staff during the forthcoming period of change. Questions were asked about overall research community engagement in the change process and it was confirmed that there had been a positive reception to the appointment of the Director of the new national network, with positive engagement in the webinar event held in May. This had provided an opportunity to reiterate that MRC recognised the critical importance of the mouse as an experimental model and would continue to invest in preclinical

models.

11. Any Other Business

It was confirmed that MRC's Sustainability Plan would be presented to Council at their December meeting. The UKRI Sustainability Plan had been published and would be circulated to members following the meeting.

12. Council Private Business

Following the meeting members held a private business meeting.

Items for Information

13. Research integrity annual report

Council noted the annual update.

14. UKRI Corporate Plan

The UKRI Corporate Plan had been published the day before the Council meeting and would be circulated to members following the meeting.

15. Updates from the Executive

The update on equality, diversity and inclusion, and initiatives to explore what the Black Lives Matter statement means for staff and the work UKRI does, was noted under item 3b.

16. Draft Agenda for the December Meeting

Council noted the draft agenda for the December joint Strategy Board and Council meeting and the Council business meeting. The chair confirmed this meeting would be held virtually.