



Trade Union side access: in parts

Minutes of the Council business meeting held on 8 March 2023

Attendees		
MRC Council	Executive Board	Presenters/Guests
Richard Murley (Chair)	Rob Buckle	Gavin Mapstone (Item 4)
John Iredale	Patrick Chinnery	Stacy-Ann Ashley (Item 6)
Kim Graham	Hugh Dunlop	Katrina Nevin Ridley (Item 6)
Roger Highfield	Claire Newland	Ceri Williams (Item 7)
Lucy Chappell	Jonathan Pearce	Rebecca Barlow (Observer Item 7 & 8, Presenter Item 9)
Jill Pell	Susan Simon	Isobel Stephen
Munir Pirmohamed		Madeline Lancaster (Item 12)
Andy Richards	Observers	Keisuke Kaji (Item 12)
Eleanor Riley	Sarah Collinge (Item 5)	
Graham Spittle	Heike Weber (Items 7-9)	Secretariat
Irene Tracey	Emily Gale (Item 9)	Simone Bryan
	Jennifer Anderson (Item 9)	Kathryn Jackson
	Laura Dickens (Item 9)	
	Louise Jones (Item 9)	
	Sarah Dickson (Item 12)	

1. Welcome and Apologies

The Council business meeting on 8 March 2023 was held at the BEIS Conference Centre. The meeting was chaired by the Senior Independent Member of Council, Mr Richard Murley.

Apologies were received from Dr Pauline Williams and Dr Precious Lunga. Professors John Iredale, Patrick Chinnery and Jill Pell joined the meeting virtually.

Isobel Stephen, UKRI Senior Observer, presented Council with a brief update on the launch of the government’s plan to cement the UK’s place as a science and technology superpower by 2030, and the Research, development and innovation (RDI) organisational landscape: an independent review” (the Landscape Review) led by Sir Paul Nurse

2. Register of declared interests

Mr Murley thanked members that had returned their annual updates and asked members to send any outstanding updated declarations to the secretariat.

3. Minutes of the Council and Strategy Board meeting on 6 December 2022 and Council business meeting held on 7 December 2022

The minutes of the joint meeting of Council and Strategy Board held on 6 December 2022, and Council business meeting held on 7 December 2022 were approved as an accurate record of the meetings.

4. Finance report

The MRC Finance Director, Mr Gavin Mapstone, provided Council with an update on the current financial position, 2022/23 allocations, 2023 extramural commitment budget and the impact of inflation on MRC's portfolio.

At the end of Period 10 (January) MRC had reported a near balanced forecast to UKRI. Since Council met in December 2022, there had been an uplift to allocations to mitigate the impact of the 10% increase to stipends for the 2022/23 academic year, and UKRI had been asked to contribute options to a rapid-spend commission deploying underspends at the beginning of January. At the time of the commission there was the potential to access significant sums of funding, but this was reduced due to other priorities within government. UKRI was still able to access and additional £120m of funding. Of this, half was awarded to Councils to support World Class Laboratories and innovation. MRC was successful in bidding for additional infrastructure and UK Innovation and Science Seed funding. Notification of the funding was only provided in February which has left universities and institutes less than two months to spend. This has meant supporting existing bids and unit/institute requirements where there was strong confidence in delivery by 31 March.

BEIS was still considering how to allocate departmental underspends for which remaining options for MRC were limited due to the proximity to year-end and the need to comply with Managing Public Money. Risks for this financial year included delivery of World Class Labs spend due to the large amounts of activity taking place in quarter four. For future years, unknown variables for the CoRE model, and how to create flexibility to respond to those. A further update would be brought back to Council at its July meeting, including the balance of spend across the portfolio and an update on preparations / options for rapid spend, which was due to be discussed at the upcoming meeting of MRC's Strategy Board in March.

Council noted the update and discussed challenges of delivering rapid spend, as spend should be awarded in accordance with how the MRC ordinarily conducts its business and to minimise risks of paying in advance of need. There was inherent volatility of grant funding and the impact of Covid, combined with single-year spending reviews, and late notification of allocations had led to larger underspends in recent years. Furthermore, the need to engage rapid spend options was often not clear until after Q2, leaving short timescales to deploy and spend funding before year-end. As such, rapid spend options often favoured equipment over people costs, and utilised mechanisms with reliable routes for delivering spend, augmenting existing activities rather than establishing new activity. Members noted that the approach to delivering underspends often targeted spend towards existing strategic investments, prioritising the requirement for quick delivery of funding within a short timescale. Members agreed that identification of rapid spend options earlier in the financial year may present opportunities to deliver science driven rapid spend, enable MRC to consider a wider range of options and identify partners with which to work up strategic opportunities. Members commented that in addition, MRC should review whether research organisations in receipt of funding from capital calls run in previous years may now be in need of replacement / upgraded infrastructure. It was agreed that rapid spend options would be discussed at MRC's Strategy Board and an update be presented to Council at its July meeting.

5. Science Commitment Budget – approval of allocations

Dr Rob Buckle, MRC's Chief Science Officer, introduced this item and reminded members that the commitment budget represented MRC's commitment to new research distributed through regular and repeating responsive mode funding schemes. Council input each year into the planning of these budgets and had previously discussed the approach to the 2023/24 commitment budget in October and December 2022. This was based on continuing the approach agreed for 2022/23 as this reflected the published MRC strategic Delivery Plan 2022-2025. The current year allocations to date had met most needs of the funding areas, providing the ability to award funding to over 90 per cent of the high-quality applications received and consideration had been given to the likely impact of inflation and increased UKRI indexation of awards from 1 April 2023, which was expected to impact evenly across funding streams. A new flexible Research Boards allocation, governed by MRC's Executive Board, was proposed.

Members noted the update and raised questions about the proportion of internationally competitive applications that are funded through response mode, and how headroom created through unit closures might start to be utilised, particularly as MRC could face an increased application demand due to unit closures. Dr Buckle confirmed the flexible allocation would be used to support any surges in high-quality applications to Boards as they are identified, as currently these decisions may be delayed until the end of the financial year. It would also allow uneven impacts of Unit transition and other large investments to be mitigated. The flexible allocation would not be used to support strategic priorities, which were currently managed through a combination of response mode funding, strategic investments and cross-cutting UKRI initiatives.

Council approved the 2023/24 commitment budget allocations. Members commented that for future approvals it would be useful to be provided with data that was used to inform options for how to distribute the available commitment budget, and how to balance investment across areas. Council requested the process for deploying the flexible budget allocation be reviewed by Strategy Board, reporting back to Council at its next meeting, before approving delegation to MRC's Executive Board.

6. Objectives of the MRC communications and engagement plan

Stacy-Ann Ashley, MRC communications business partner, and Katrina Nevin-Ridley, UKRI Director of External Relations, Communications and Public Engagement updated Council on the process and development of the MRC communications and engagement plan. UKRI had worked with partners to inform the development of a new communications and engagement strategy. The refreshed approach was more audience specific, with a focus on articulating what UKRI is and how it adds value. MRC's specific communications and engagement plan was nestled within UKRI's overarching communications strategy, and aligned with and supported MRC's 2022 – 2025 Strategic Delivery Plan.

Council welcomed the update and noted the progress, particularly in resource allocation, since its last communications update. Members highlighted opportunities that should be considered as the communications and engagement plan was being refreshed, in particular; given resource was limited, MRC should utilise its relationships with universities and the Science Media Centre to maximise its communications impact; MRC should work collaboratively with the UKRI international communications team to deliver messaging that would better encourage researchers and businesses into the UK, and; UKRI should consider whether data included in the Campaign for Science and Engineering's report on public understanding of research and development could help to inform a more cohesive approach to the communications strategy of UKRI, increasing its impact.

Members commented on the importance of MRC making the case to government for long term investment in research, and given the scarce staffing resource, communications activity should be prioritised to this end. Case studies were highlighted as an effective way to convey the impact of sustained, long-term investment. It was confirmed that MRC's communications and engagement business partner was developing a suite of communication material for government to highlight the impact of MRC's investments, which would ultimately also enhance recognition for UKRI. However, it was noted that such backward looking evidence is less impactful than more immediate/timely evidence (e.g. the following trial just delivered x). This requiring better insights into planned portfolio news announcements.

Council approved the purpose and objectives of the communications and engagement plan, stressing the need to target language used to different audiences.

7. Major Investment Board – first year of operation

Dr Ceri Williams, MRC Head of Strategic Projects, presented Council with an update on the work of the new MRC Major Investments Board (MIB) and the implementation of the new MRC Centres of Research Excellence funding model (CoRE). At its meeting in December 2021, Council approved proposals to establish a new approach to supporting Units/Centres which represented one of the most significant MRC funding policy shifts in the past decade. Over the last 12 months the focus had been on shaping the MRC CoRE funding model and managing the transition of existing Units to the new funding model and managing the expectations of potential applicants and Higher Education institution (HEIs). MIB had considered the place agenda and its most recent meeting MIB had started to consider the major investments portfolio in more detail, for example in considering MRC's approach to population health and clinical trials where MRC had significant Unit investments, and further scoping themes for future rounds of the MRC CoRE scheme.

Council welcomed the update and asked questions about the breadth and extent of engagement with stakeholders. The outreach activity to support implementation of the MRC CoRE model was outlined. The MRC strategic projects team were engaged in positive discussions regarding co-funding with charities and other Councils of UKRI. There had been meetings with Unit and Centre Directors, and HEIs that host Units, and discussions on the new model were held at the MRC Investigators meeting. The MIB-agreed transition principles were shared with Unit directors and host-HEIs in October 2022 and there was ongoing dialogue to ensure that messages were understood and cascaded appropriately. More in depth work was being undertaken with universities that host three or more units, to discuss areas of opportunity and the transitional considerations for their Units, given the level of the associated financial and HR risks that will need to be managed.

Council asked questions about the pipeline of existing unit transitions. As Units were able to apply to the MRC CoRE opportunity and not necessarily have to fit within a theme, members questioned how MRC would refresh and define its portfolio, ensuring that it consisted of centres of excellence aligned to strategic priorities. It was confirmed that a managed process was in place to balance the need to be able to shape the portfolio, manage demand and be responsive to strategic opportunities. For purely response mode activities, the process incorporated sufficient flexibility for existing Units that wish to transition to make their case, and there were ongoing engagement activities with stakeholders to further scope thematic areas.

It was noted that some MRC Council members were affiliated to organisations which are eligible to apply for MRC CoRE funding and Council members, Professor Jill Pell and Dr Pauline Williams were also members of MIB. However, these were not viewed as substantive conflicts of interest as no funding decisions were being made.

8. Update on the outcomes of the MRC/NERC joint council meeting

Dr Jonathan Pearce introduced this item and thanked Council for their contributions and feedback following the joint Council meeting with NERC in December 2022. An update was provided on the next steps taken and the new MRC and cross-council activities within the area of environment and health. MRC and NERC head offices had formed a small task and finish group to further develop areas of joint opportunity and develop recommendations for discussion at their respective Summer 2023 Council meetings. The group would be considering emerging opportunities including the Chief Medical Officer's (CMO's) annual report for 2022 focused on air pollution (MRC and NERC were exploring a possible cross-council initiative, together with NIHR, under the UKRI strategic theme, *Building a Green Future*); and a call for a Centre in climate change and health with supplementary funds from AHRC, BBSRC, EPSRC and ESRC. There were discussions planned at the upcoming March meeting of MRC's Strategy Board, which would allow Strategy Board members an opportunity to provide input into the indoor air quality theme, and the office to request the necessary budget to underpin future activities.

Council members agreed the formal model of the joint MRC-NERC council meeting was successful but recognised the high resource requirements and time needed to organise such meetings and facilitate next steps, especially if this was conducted as a series of Council-by-Council meetings. It was agreed that a variety of other flexible and / or lighter touch approaches to internal stakeholder engagement should also be considered. Dr Pearce confirmed he was in discussion with colleagues in BBSRC and EPSRC (and considering linkages with Innovate UK) with a view to facilitating discussion of bottom-up shared ambitions which would allow MRC to more rapidly respond to opportunities and themes as they emerge throughout the year, particularly in the context of preparation for the next Spending Review. Dr Pearce commented how there was still some work to do to convey one narrative across all UKRI's funding activities relevant to human health. Members recommended Council – Council meetings be based around scientific themes, which could be open to all Council members across UKRI with relevant expertise. Members also highlighted the importance of engaging with stakeholders from across the life sciences and industry sectors, NHS and NIHR at future thematic meetings.

Members suggested a theme-based session would also be useful to include in the 'All Council's Councils' meeting later this year.

9. Strategic Delivery Plan (SDP) Performance Framework

Dr Rebecca Barlow, MRC Head of Strategy and Planning, presented Council with plans for monitoring performance against the ambitions in the MRC Strategic Delivery Plan 2022-2025. The MRC's SDP was published in September 2022, setting out ambitions for the medium-term (three years plus) and actions over the three-year Spending Review period. The proposed performance monitoring framework was developed by drawing on the lessons learnt from the 2019 Delivery Plan, expert input from MRC's Evaluation and Analysis Team and consideration of different models of performance monitoring. During the development phase helpful challenge and constructive feedback was received from MRC Council, which highlighted the importance of monitoring progress and being able to critically assess whether positive steps towards achieving strategic ambitions are being made at the organisation level. The draft performance monitoring framework was centred around the six strategic objectives of the MRC SDP and UKRI Strategy. However, to trial the approach, two objectives were focused on in the first instance: Objective 1: People and Careers, and Objective 4: Innovation.

Members noted the update and welcomed the new approach. Council commented that given the timescale of scientific research, it was not expected that large-scale changes in the research ecosystem would be demonstrated within the three-year reporting period. Members noted that the proposed framework aimed to focus on fewer measures, which would better map progress against the high-level ambitions and priorities within the SDP. It was highlighted that as well as progress indicators and quantitative metrics, the approach should include more focus on qualitative measures, especially leading indicators of impact. This would be challenging but would provide a more sophisticated approach. The planned collection of case studies was also considered an important qualitative measure and would support, deliver and promote content for MRC's priority audiences.

It was proposed that a progress report is presented to MRC Council on an annual basis, starting with a baseline analysis of the first two exemplar objectives in Summer 2023, followed by the first progress report in Summer 2024. Questions were raised as to at which point MRC would take action if expected progress was not being made. Dr Pearce confirmed that it would be important for the office to seek Council input to allow comments and steers from Council to be fed back into the process, potentially using RAG status reporting or similar methods to indicate progress. The annual report would allow Council to comment on the data that had been gathered, advise on any further information that would be helpful, and suggest areas which may warrant further or more in-depth discussion. In addition, the office would identify Council Champions for each of the six SDP objectives, to provide advice as the framework was finalised; including on the selection of the most impactful and informative metrics, and to ensure that the key interests and concerns of MRC Council were being addressed.

10. Applied Global Health Research Board (AGHRB) Chair Appointment

Dr Rob Buckle introduced this item. MRC was seeking to appoint a new chair to replace Professor Catherine Law, current chair of the Applied Global Health Research Board. Following interviews an offer of appointment had been made to Graham Hart, Professor of Sexual Health and HIV Research at the Institute of Global Health, University College London.

Council noted the high quality of candidates. Members highlighted the need for data on diversity across MRC's research board and panel membership when ratifying decisions on board chair appointments, and questions were raised as to what equality, diversity and inclusion considerations had been made at each stage of the process. Dr Buckle confirmed that the diversity of research board and panel membership was monitored and managed by MRC's Executive Board, through MRC's annual membership recruitment exercise, and Board Chair appointments follow the same processes for considering and promoting diversity. Advertisement and recruitment campaign material was subject to equality impact assessments and shortlists included male and female candidates. It was agreed that equality, diversity and inclusion data should routinely be provided to Council for future Board Chair appointments.

The appointment was approved.

Professors John Iredale and Eleanor Riley were part of the interviewing panel, but this was not considered a material conflict.

11. Council forward-look 2023/24

Simone Bryan, MRC Head of Programme for Policy and Governance, presented Council with meeting plans for 2023/24. Members noted the forward look which was based on MRC day-to-day business and strategic issues, themes driven by government, and other events occurring during the financial year. Council was asked to suggest any additional topics for

discussion at forthcoming meetings, comment on plans for Council-Council meetings, and approve Glasgow as the preferred location for the next regional meeting of Council in October 2023.

Mr Murley noted that discussion relating to the development of rapid spend options, and internal stakeholder engagement with other councils, or parts of councils, had been covered under previous items in the meeting.

Members noted the developing plans for its annual regional stakeholder engagement meeting and approved Glasgow as the location, commenting that clinical and translational research could be an agenda discussion item. Members suggested potential attendees and speakers and agreed one or two Council members should be identified to help shape plans for the meeting.

12. Scientific speakers

Council received presentations from Dr Madeline Lancaster, MRC Laboratory of Molecular Biology, and Professor Keisuke Kaji, MRC Senior Fellow, University of Edinburgh. Council welcomed the opportunity to discuss their work and perspectives on the ethical dimensions and translational potential of their research.

13. Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) Considerations in decision making

Council reviewed the decisions made during the meeting for EDI considerations, noting the following; diversity data would need to be provided in future for decisions relating to Board Chair appointments; place and the levelling up agenda should be embedded into the options analysis for the deployment of underspend and; EDI should be considered as part of MRC's commitment to supporting unit staff onto grant / fellowship support and honouring commitments to existing PhD students and Programme Leader Track researchers.

14. Environmental Sustainability considerations

Council reviewed the decisions made during the meeting for environmental sustainability considerations, noting that those were implicit for the Update on the outcomes of the MRC/NERC joint council meeting (item 8). It was highlighted that the CoRE model requires host HEI sustainability plans to be submitted and as part of the refreshed communications and engagement plan there is a digital first approach to content creation and branding.

Dr Susan Simon, MRC Director of Estates, reminded members that UKRI was developing a concordat for increasing the environmental sustainability of research and innovation across the country, with a consultation going live in April 2023. An update on MRC's environmental sustainability plan would be presented to Council at a future meeting.

15. Any other business

A question was raised about the infected blood enquiry.

16. Council private business

Following the meeting members held a private business meeting.

Items for Information

Council noted the following papers for information:

17. Updates from the Executive

18. Quarterly Operations Updates: dashboards