



Trade Union side access: in parts

Minutes of the Council business meeting held on 10 May 2023

Attendees		
MRC Council	Executive Board	Presenters/Guests
Richard Murley	Rob Buckle	Gavin Mapstone (Item 4)
John Iredale	Patrick Chinnery	Ottoline Leyser (Item 5)
Lucy Chappell	Hugh Dunlop	Heike Weber (Item 10)
Roger Highfield	Claire Newland	Jef Grainger (Item 10)
Precious Lunga	Jonathan Pearce	Rachel Knowles (Item 11)
Munir Pirmohamed	Susan Simon	Carole Walker (Item 12)
Andy Richards		Anya Bek (Item 12)
Eleanor Riley	Observers	
	Joely Kellard (Item 5)	Secretariat
	Anna Kinsey (Item 9)	Simone Bryan
	Steve Oakeshott (Item 10)	Kathryn Jackson

1. Welcome and Apologies

The Council business meeting on 10 May 2023 was held at Caxton House. The meeting was chaired by MRC's Executive Chair, Professor John Iredale and MRC Clinical Director, Professor Patrick Chinnery for items 6, 7, 8 and 9.

Apologies were received from Professors Kim Graham, Jill Pell and Irene Tracey, Dr Graham Spittle and Ms Isobel Stephen.

Mr Richard Murley, Professor Eleanor Riley and Dr Precious Lunga joined the meeting virtually. Dr Lunga was delayed and joined during item 9.

Dr Lucy Chappell left the meeting after item 9 and re-joined the meeting virtually for items 10 and 11.

Professor John Iredale was absent from the meeting for items 6,7 and 8.

2. Register of declared interests

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

3. Minutes of the Council meeting on 8 March 2023

One amendment to the minutes of the Council business meeting held on 8 March 2023 was raised. Dr Pauline Williams was incorrectly given the title of Professor. The secretariat made a record and would address the amendment.

3a. Matters Arising

At its meeting in March, members requested the process for deploying the flexible budget allocation be reviewed by MRC's Strategy Board, reporting back to Council at its next meeting. Dr Rob Buckle, MRC Chief Science Officer, confirmed that Strategy Board had approved the process at its meeting in March.

Council noted the update and approved the flexible budget delegation to MRC's Executive Board.

4. Finance report

MRC Finance Director, Mr Gavin Mapstone, provided Council with an update on the 2022/23 provisional outturn, allocations and extramural commitment budget, and 2023/24 financial year. The 2022/23 financial position was a £3.3 million underspend. Allocations supporting baseline research and infrastructure were fully deployed with small underspends returned on ring-fenced programmes where there was reduced ability to mitigate underspends. This represented a considerable success for MRC given the budgetary pressures managed during the year. Since Council last met decisions had been made by the Department of Science Innovation and Technology (DSIT) on deploying departmental underspends. The late confirmation meant there were limited opportunities to support new activity, but MRC was successful in making a case for further funding to support medical research charities. UKRI was reviewing allocations and legal commitments for 2023/24 and 2024/25 following government announcements to support new investments in exascale computing, artificial intelligence, quantum, and semi-conductors. UKRI had been requested by DSIT to reprioritise funding from existing spending review allocations to support this. MRC would offer to reprioritise a modest amount of the 2022/23 commitment budget to support capacity building / networking within these areas and contribute to a reduction of Councils' infrastructure spend, given this could be restored quickly if additional funding became available.

Council welcomed the update and noted the successful delivery of the budget. Members thanked MRC staff for their work to deliver activity, much of which occurred late in the financial year. Members noted concerns about potential implications for the next spending review, following governments announcements, and how these implications will be managed. Members raised questions about the proposed stipend increase for the 2023/24 academic year and how the impact of the increase would be mitigated. It was confirmed that discussions about how to mitigate inflationary pressures were ongoing at MRC's Executive Board and would be brought back to Council as part of the regular finance and budget discussion updates.

Council questioned how the reduction in operating expenditure and below inflation pay awards were impacting retention and recruitment of MRC staff. The outlook was challenging as UKRI looked to reduce its headcount and expenditure to meet DSIT targets. For MRC this meant a reduction in full time equivalent in 2022/23 with further reductions likely in 2024/25. MRC was currently carrying a number of vacancies which was placing pressure on existing staff. It was anticipated that the new Operating Model and IT systems would ultimately help meet DSIT operating expenditure targets.

Council suggested a future discussion on forecasting the royalties pipeline could be useful for its regular financial planning discussions, to help mitigate the challenges associated with short timescales to deploy and spend funding before year-end.

5. UKRI CEO update

Council members welcomed Professor Dame Ottoline Leyser to the meeting. Dame Ottoline gave an overview of key topics and took questions from members.

Dame Ottoline briefly updated members on the progress of the pay award for UKRI staff and the appointment for a new Executive Chair for MRC. The pay award put forward by UKRI was waiting for HMT approval and at the time of the meeting an offer of appointment had been made to a new Executive Chair. The public appointment process had taken a considerable amount of time and Dame Ottoline thanked Professor Iredale for his ongoing period of appointment as MRC's interim Executive Chair.

Dame Ottoline commented on the Independent Review of the UK's Research, Development and Innovation Organisational Landscape, in that overall, the report recommendations were aligned with UKRI strategy. As UKRI has a large portfolio the organisation had flexibility to rebalance investment across its portfolio to reprioritise activity when needed, as had been demonstrated through UKRI's response to the pandemic. This was important for supporting government priorities, scaling activity up or down to deliver funding into reprioritised areas quickly. As such, UKRI was a well-placed strategic delivery partner of government departments, and members commented that it might be useful to discuss how MRC could best partner with Government departments to facilitate the delivery of the Government's Life Sciences Vision. It was acknowledged that there was an ongoing tension to manage between supporting short term priorities and the need for continued long-term sustained strategic investment in research. There was an essential role of the research sector in highlighting and celebrating successes of sustained research and innovation investment, particularly in demonstrating the value and vital role research and innovation plays in building the economy. Supporting the delivery of the strategic goals set out in the Government's Science and Technology Framework would be key.

Dame Ottoline updated on Horizon Europe (HEu) funding. The UK government and EU were still in the process of negotiating the terms of the UK's association and it was recognised that researchers in the UK were experiencing difficulties due to uncertainty. UKRI was playing a key role in tackling delays with advice and guidance to researchers on navigating the funding process and working with UK government to prepare for all outcomes and transition to longer-term alternatives, in case they were needed. The ability to stand-up longer-term programmes, with minimal bureaucracy and at short notice was critical. There still remained the major challenge of responding to a rapid-spend commission deploying HEu underspends if delays in association continued.

Dame Ottoline reminded members of UKRI's collective talent funding; there was a strong track record of collaborative working across councils in talent, and this collective approach would strengthen and extend that. A key outcome would be to facilitate training and work across disciplines and across the research and innovation system. It remained individual Councils' decisions as to the balance of funding between studentships and fellowships and for MRC, how best to support clinical academics. Council highlighted sector concerns about the insufficient pipeline of clinical academics. Members commented that as clinical academics have different career pathways to non-clinical academics, it was crucial to ensure the right expertise on funding panels to make fair assessments of applications. It would be useful to discuss how MRC could best support clinical academics, and it was agreed that a discussion item on MRC's strategy for Training and Careers would be brought back to Council at a future meeting.

Members raised questions about the interactions between UKRI Board and individual Council's Councils and whether there were opportunities to put formal mechanisms in place

for knowledge sharing. It was confirmed that work was underway to revise individual Council's Councils Terms of Reference, with the role of Councils being to provide independent scrutiny, challenge and advice. As many members had now rotated off the UKRI Board, there was now an opportunity to build relationships and understanding of each of the nine constituent Councils strategies and activities, and for Councils to engage with the UKRI Board in a variety of ways to facilitate the efficient and effective transfer of knowledge.

6. Scheduling of Council meetings and Revised Council Terms of Reference

Simone Bryan, MRC Head of Programme for Policy and Governance, presented a proposal to reduce the number of Council meetings from five to four per year, retaining the option to hold a fifth as a virtual meeting, when needed. UKRI Board had been reviewing the role and size of the Councils' councils, within the context of the recommendations on UKRI's governance arrangements, as set out in the UKRI Independent Review. A revised Council Terms of Reference and Delegations Framework were being drafted and the responsibilities of Council as set out in the revised Council ToR were included in the paper. It was anticipated there would be little change to Council's current responsibilities and day to day business. MRC had put forward a well-justified case for reducing its membership by just one (from 2023/24), in order to retain the huge value gained from the diversity of views, backgrounds, experience and geographical representation among members. Furthermore, MRC already had a simplified governance structure in having no sub-committees of Council. However, there was now an opportunity to review how to achieve efficiency savings and reduce burden upon Council members and staff, without losing effectiveness. Reducing the number of Council meetings from five to four per year was one way in which to do this and allowed more time for in-depth preparation of discussion topics.

Council noted the proposal and suggested it might be useful to consider fixed days when scheduling meetings, to accommodate member requirements. The proposal was approved.

7. Review of Council objectives for 2022/23 and proposed objectives for 2023/24 including Council self-assessment

Simone Bryan updated Council on the key themes emerging from the Council's self-assessment of effectiveness and the progress against the objectives set for 2022/23. Members were reminded that under the MRC Council's terms of reference, Council was required to conduct an annual self-assessment of its effectiveness. The process included a questionnaire sent to Council members, followed by discussions between the Executive Chair and individual Council members. Overall, members commented that meetings were run well and were satisfied with the quality and quantity of information in the papers and paperwork was generally considered to be of very good quality. The balance of skills and experience amongst the Council was considered appropriate with a few specific suggestions of useful experience, specifically; private sector, data science, AI, legal and ethics. Overall members felt that there had been good progress against the 2022/23 objectives, with some areas being carried over into proposed objectives for 2023/24 where work was ongoing.

Council noted the themes emerging from the annual self-assessment exercise. Members commented that they did not have sight of how diverse the membership of MRC governance structures was, and requested to receive more information in order to understand the diversity of the applicant pool and how MRC could support the talent pipeline, and how diversity was currently considered during recruitment processes. It was confirmed that diversity of membership of MRC Research Board and Panels was monitored and managed by MRC's Executive Board, through MRC's annual membership recruitment exercise. There were already plans to provide Council with diversity data across MRC's governance structures as context for a discussion which would look to seek Council input into how diversity across

MRC's governance structures could be increased. This would be brought to Council at a future meeting.

The proposed actions to address themes emerging from the annual self-assessment exercise and proposed Council objectives for 2023/24 were approved.

8. Environmental Sustainability update

Dr Susan Simon, MRC Director of Capital and Estates, updated Council on the progress of the Environmental Sustainability Programme (ESP). Whilst MRC was making steady progress in reducing use of energy, water and production of waste. Travel activities had started to increase again after a complete halt during COVID. Subject to the future developments in the travel emissions, the MRC ESP was confident that the target to halve the overall emissions of the MRC by 2030 would be met. The cost of Net Zero activities was estimated to range between £145 million to £200 million. UKRI would not be able to fund all Net Zero costs and therefore Councils were expected to contribute. MRC on its own may not be able to provide funding for all the required activities and would need to seek out alternative funding sources, such as Salix. The programme delivery had been strengthened through the recruitment of the Programme Director which had made a positive impact on difference in driving forward the programme. Furthermore, many of the activities had been achieved with a small group of people, most of which were volunteers, delivering work alongside their normal responsibilities.

The programme has organised a range of different engagement activities, which were successful and impactful, where specific outputs were targeted. A seminar series had been established, which was considering various aspects of research activities through the lens of environmental sustainability. This had started in July 2022 with focus on estates and facilities and in March 2023 with focus on Health & Safety and Business Continuity. Both had been well attended by representatives from research organisations across the UK. A joint workshop with the Academy of Sciences had been held to understand the key barriers to overcome for the science community to become more sustainable in all their activities. The event was attended by decision makers from a wide range of organisations including Universities, Institutes, NHS, NIHR and included a mix of scientists, clinicians, technicians, and senior staff. Key outputs would be incorporated in future activities.

Council noted the update and asked questions about how activities were prioritised. Dr Simon confirmed that the feasibility study had produced proposed carbon reduction figures, and these were used to target activities that would have the largest impact. Engagement activities and knowledge sharing had helped to identify a number of 'quick wins' that could be implemented quickly and had delivered immediate impact. Council commented that as the CoRE model required host Higher Education Institutes to submit sustainability plans, it would be useful to consider whether the impact of long-term research upon future sustainability targets should be monitored and embedded within these plans. Members commented that Salix funding was extremely competitive and there was often the need to deploy funds rapidly. Dr Simon confirmed that a comprehensive piece of work had already been undertaken that would readily provide information required for application to Salix funding schemes, and the new Programme Director has experience in successfully applying for funding. Council commented on the challenges of transformation of the supply chain and how working in partnership with other charities and funding agencies might help to address some of the challenges.

9. COVID research and innovation impact review

Dr Jonathan Pearce, MRC Director of Strategy, and chair of the COVID-19 evaluation steering group, provided Council with an update on the UKRI COVID research and innovation impact review. The impact evaluation had only considered the Research and Innovation response to

Covid-19, which covered deployment of existing capabilities, strategic, international and responsive mode calls, and platform and consortia studies. Around 90% of UKRI-funded awards produced at least one type of use-oriented outcome, the main outputs being Data / knowledge contributing towards managing / understanding COVID-19, and technology / materials / processes to address challenges of COVID-19. The UK had focused the greatest proportion of its research output on COVID-19 and a cost-benefit analysis showed that the investments made by UKRI represented value for money to the taxpayer, with frequent and rapid connections between research outputs and policy developments. The UK's research and innovation landscape had sufficient size, breadth and sophistication to be able to rise to the challenges presented by COVID-19 and UKRI had played a major role in these overall existing framework conditions. Recommendations from the evaluation included: UK government's continued support of UKRI in its longstanding commitment to invest at scale in public research and innovation; further efforts to ensure systematic convening between UKRI's awardees and potential user groups; to strengthen preparedness planning and response in UKRI and to enhance working in partnership with Government departments when collaboration adds value to UKRI's response and where UKRI can play an important convening role. A task and finish group was being set up to support delivery of the recommendations and a report launch was planned.

Council welcomed the update and suggested that UKRI works with the Science Media Centre to launch the report, which should be targeted at both public and government audiences. Members noted that attempts to communicate what had made the response so successful needed to recognise the high level of resource required to deliver at pace and that all effort was focused on COVID studies, with many other studies, services and research activities being suspended, paused or cancelled. Questions were raised about delays in accessing funds, once awards had been made. It was confirmed that permission for access to funds needed to be sought from HMT which had resulted in delays. Council commented how UKRI's support for the RECOVERY trial into treatments for COVID-19 and the UK COVID-19 Therapeutics Advisory Panel (UK-CTAP) was key to the UK's response and had had a significant impact on the length of hospital stays and associated costs. Approaches that supported rapid generation, and availability and linkages of insights and data would be a critical part of response to future pandemics. As programmes aiming to deliver fast solutions, with shorter award durations produced outputs and outcomes rapidly, members questioned whether there were any lessons learned that could be applied to current programmes of research. Members commented on the proportion of responders to the survey that stated they did not benefit from support from UKRI other than funding and commented that the range of support provided to researchers, for example, pre-submission advice, should be considered in the design of future rapid funding calls.

10. Update on Health Ageing and Wellbeing and Tackling Infections Strategic Initiatives

Dr Pearce briefly reminded Council of the financial context for cross UKRI strategic programmes, which were funded outwith MRC's core commitment budget. There followed an update from Dr Heike Weber, MRC Associate Director Strategy and Planning and Dr Jef Grainger, BBSRC Associate Director of Thematic Research Challenges, on the UKRI Health Ageing and Wellbeing and Tackling Infections strategic initiatives. The UKRI strategy had set out five strategic themes which aimed to tackle major national and global challenges; building a green future; building a secure and resilient world; creating opportunities; improving outcomes; securing better health, ageing and wellbeing; and tackling infections.

The aim of the Health Ageing and Wellbeing theme was to improve population health, tackle the health inequalities affecting people and communities, and advance interventions that keep people healthier for longer, and had four sub-themes (population health improvement, ageing throughout life, mental health and digital health), the aims of which were described. The aim of the Tackling Infections theme was to tackle major infectious disease challenges that threaten national and global health, wellbeing, security, prosperity and environments and would be essential to meeting UN Sustainable Development Goals and Net Zero targets. The theme would support new interdisciplinary activity and work to amplify and connect existing UKRI investments across two phases of investment; phase one leveraging core commitments in targeted priority areas and phase two, building on the key capabilities established in phase one.

Council noted the update. Dr Roger Highfield commented that the UKRI Building a Green Future Advisory Board, of which he was a member, had mapped the UKRI portfolio aligned to the green economy and MRC's contribution to the portfolio was relatively small. It was agreed that both a systems approach and targeted initiatives were needed to both achieve longer-term change and to demonstrate impact within five years. It would be important to ensure that for the Tackling Infections Initiative there was appropriate use of digital health technologies which could help to ensure that research was both inclusive of, and relevant to, underrepresented groups.

Council commented that there had been a lot of research on health inequalities, but there was a gap in uptake of research into policy. MRC's Executive Chair, Professor Iredale, commented that key priority themes for the next Spending Review Period could include strengthening prevention research - increasing healthy life years, strengthen health equity and reducing the burden on the NHS by intercepting diseases earlier and targeting common mechanisms underlying multiple diseases. This could enhance the evidence base for policy interventions and support policy change. It could be useful to convene a funders group across DHSC, NIHR, MRC, NHS and other stakeholders, to coordinate activity.

11. Diversity in Research

Dr Rachel Knowles, MRC Lead for Clinical Research, Policy, Ethics and Governance, introduced this item. Dr Knowles updated Council on the development and implementation of a new MRC policy on inclusive research design. This had been informed by evidence review and recommendations of expert groups drawn from MRC Boards and Panels, including that Chaired by Council member Professor Jill Pell. The new policy incorporated MRC's existing guidance on Sex in Experimental Design and extended to research involving human participants. Implementation of the policy would address a key goal in MRC's Strategic Delivery Plan.

Council welcomed the development of the policy and congratulated staff on their work. Council noted that MRC had demonstrated leadership in implementing the requirement to consider sex in experimental design of studies involving animals, with other UK funders following suit. Members highlighted the need to ensure alignment with the NIHR-INCLUDE framework and commented that engagement with the Home Office Animals in Science Regulation Unit (ASRU) would be important. It was confirmed that MRC Head office had engaged and was continuing to engage with relevant stakeholders throughout development of the policy, including, for example, with ASRU, and was working to align expectations of animal research in the sector. Members commented on; the need to include thorough reporting in research outputs; the need to include consideration of underrepresented groups, particularly the elderly and pregnant women, in studies; and acknowledged potential difficulties and barriers to change, especially the potential increased costs of studies and perceived increase in animal numbers, and emphasised the importance of clear communication and guidance for the research community. Members also noted that with appropriate statistical design and analysis,

research studies may need only modest increase (less than 20%) in number of animals. Council stressed the importance of guidance and training for the community to promote best practice and adherence to the 3Rs, to support researchers with more clever and appropriate research design and statistical analyses.

12. Bi-annual Risk Review

Carole Walker, UKRI Head of Risk and Anya Bek, MRC Risk Business Partner, introduced this item to Council. Following a Board/Executive Committee (ExCo) risk workshop in January and further discussion with ExCo and Audit and Risk Assurance Committee, a new approach had been developed for the UKRI principal risk register (PRR). The top 10 risks for the UKRI board had been agreed and ExCo would review in detail one of the top 10 risks at each of their meetings, along with the related PRR risks and other significant risks from across UKRI. Reviews had taken place of the MRC Top risk register and a mapping exercise would be completed and presented to Executive Board between the UKRI quadrant risk and MRC Top risk. This would help understand correlation and if there were any gaps that need addressing.

Council noted the update and raised questions about the SHARP programme, specifically when it would be rolled out and whether there were plans to run the old and new system in tandem as the programme rolled out. It was confirmed that the programme had a strong governance framework and several check points needed successful completion before the roll out would be approved by UKRI's Executive Committee. The SHARP programme was included in the UKRI PRR under risk relating to effectiveness of UKRI systems and IT infrastructure, and a risk relating to roll out of the new system in MRC's Institutes was included on MRC's corporate risk register.

Members commented on the need for nuanced language for risks on MRC's corporate risk register relating to MRC's relationships with the charity and industry sectors.

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

Council reviewed the decisions made during the meeting for EDI considerations, noting that these were implicit for update on MRC's diversity in research policy and noted the following; diversity data would need to be provided for discussion relating to diversity across MRC governance structures; COVID had disproportionately impacted different parts of community to contribute; Health inequalities were embedded within the Tackling Infections and Health, Ageing and Wellbeing, themes.

14. Environmental Sustainability considerations

Council reviewed the decisions made during the meeting for environmental sustainability considerations, noting that the increase in digital work and data sharing that emerged through the pandemic had a strong environmental focus.

15. Any other business

Members present in person were asked to give consent for photographs to be taken for use on the UKRI website.

Two items were raised in relation to information contained within Updates from The Executive paper: members requested to see a copy of the letter from Professor John Iredale to the chair of the House of Lords Science and Technology Committee: Clinical academics in the NHS, outlining MRC's response to the committee's recommendations.

Dr Buckle brought to Council's attention the closure of two MRC units, as detailed in the paper.

16. Council private business

Following the meeting members held a private business meeting.

Items for Information

Council noted the following papers for information, and questions were asked under Any Other Business:

17. Updates from the Executive

18. Quarterly Operations Updates: dashboards