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UKRI ENGINEERING AND PHYSICAL SCIENCES RESEARCH COUNCIL

EDITED MINUTES OF THE VIRTUAL COUNCIL MEETING HELD ON 13 MAY 2020

Council Members:	Professor M E Smith (Chair – until item 7)
	Professor L Gladden (Chair – from item 7)
	Professor M Calder
	Professor A Etheridge
	Professor N Jennings
	Professor S Sharples
	Dr J de Sousa
	Professor I Walmsley
	Professor T Whitley
	Dr P Williams
	Professor A Wright
	Professor S Belcher
Executive:	Dr A Bourne
	Professor C Deane
	Ms S Francis
	Mr G Mapstone
	Ms J Nicholson
	Dr K Pandya
	Professor M Parsons
	Dr N Viner
	Dr A Wall
	Dr K Magnay
	Mr A Paul
Others:	Mr Mark Bussey, UKRI
Secretary:	Dr N Goldberg

1. Introductory Remarks

1.1 Professor Smith welcomed everyone to the meeting and reminded members of the protocols for running this virtual meeting of Council. He added that as this was the first virtual meeting that this Council had held, the Office would canvas members after the meeting to seek views and to establish how we might improve the meeting experience in the future should it prove necessary to meet virtually again.

1.2 Professor Smith formally opened the meeting. He extended a particular welcome to Professor Mark Parsons, EPSRC Director for Research Computing and Mr Mark Bussey, UKRI Director of Future Shared Services (FSS). Both were attending their first Council meeting.

1.3 Apologies had been received from Mr Blackburn.

1.4 There were no new declarations of interest from Council members at this point in the meeting although there were later specific declarations for agenda items 4 and 5. These are specifically recorded in minutes 5 and 6 respectively.

2.   Draft Minutes of the Meeting on 10 and 11 March 2020

2.1   Council **agreed** the record of the last meeting.

3.   Actions and Matters Arising

3.1   There were ten actions from the last meeting. Council noted those that were completed and those that were in-hand. Council received specific updates as follows:

i)   Minute 4.4: Professor Gladden reported that the development of the UKRI 2025 Strategy was currently on hold because of the current Covid-related situation, the delay in the SR process and pending the appointment of the new UKRI CEO.

ii)   Minute 8.3: Dr Pandya reported on the further engagements and activities that had followed the last Council meeting with representatives from both MRC and BBSRC. Council members reiterated how useful and fruitful this had proved. Dr Pandya informed Council that he would bring back the Spending Review content for the Transforming Health and Healthcare area to a future Council meeting.

iii)   Minute 12.3: Dr Goldberg confirmed that a further paper concerning responsible innovation would be scheduled for a subsequent Council meeting.

iv)   Minute 13.3: Dr Goldberg confirmed that the Council recruitment exercise would go live shortly and that she would circulate it to members for dissemination to their networks.

4.   Executive Update (EPSRC 09-20)

4.1   The update primarily focused on the UKRI sponsored research effort in response to the Covid-19 pandemic, the operational impact that it has had, and finally a discussion about the potential longer-term impacts on the EPS research and training funding landscape. Council welcomed the endeavour by UKRI to harness the UK's research capability to tackle this crisis. It particularly congratulated EPSRC staff on transitioning to remote working so seamlessly. They agreed that the professionalism demonstrated by EPSRC staff throughout the last few months had been impressive.

4.2   Council discussed at some length the impact of the current Covid-19 situation and the possible future ramifications for the research funding environment and the overall higher education sector. Council broadly agreed with the risks that had been articulated by the Executive and escalated to UKRI colleagues. **Minute not included as contains exempt material, at the time of publication, under the terms of the Freedom of Information Act 2000.**

4.3   Council also discussed the ability of universities and researchers to continue to provide contributions in the form of funding and or staff resource to support research grant applications. It was felt that there was an expectation about such contributions and that this would need to be addressed in the current environment. In response Professor Gladden said that, for all but a few schemes, contributions of this kind were not a pre-requirement to funding and that this was an incorrect assumption on the part of peer reviewers, HEIs and applicants alike. She undertook to urgently consider how best to directly communicate with all these constituencies in order to dispel this notion. She said that she would inform UKRI Executive Committee of her intention to do this. Council added that for the few schemes where some level of matched contribution is expected, then the extent of these should also be reviewed in the current financial climate.

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4.4 Council received an update on EPSRC's current and future financial position. Council noted the final outturn for 2019/20 and the provisional budget allocation for the current year and welcomed the resolution of the funding uncertainties that had faced the new institutes. **Minute not included as contains exempt material, at the time of publication, under the terms of the Freedom of Information Act 2000.**

4.5 Professor Gladden reported that the Spending Review had been put on hold and anticipated that this will not be revisited until the autumn at the earliest. However, she added that EPSRC continued to engage with other Councils and Government Departments on potential bids and on the longer-term research priorities in a post Covid-19 world.

4.6 Ms Nicholson updated Council about a review of fellowships that was currently underway and which would be fully reported to Council in July. She said that the review was intended to look at ways to revise EPSRC's fellowship offering, given changes in the research and innovation landscape with the principal objective of developing new and more "open fellowships". She said that it was hoped that these would:

    i) Deliver high quality research with a focus on discovery science, innovation or instrumentation/technique development.

    ii) Provide the opportunity to lead in areas of research citizenship such as responsible innovation, equality, diversity and inclusion or public engagement.

    iii) Be open for all EPSRC remit areas, including multidisciplinary work.

    iv) Be flexible in career stage.

4.7 Council discussed the broad objectives of the review. It noted that, some of the engagement associated with the review and the development of precise recommendations and operational details were ongoing, nevertheless it felt that it was helpful at this juncture to **agree** the following broad principles in advance of the final review report:

    i) To move away from dedicated career stages for early and established career awards.

    ii) To move away from fellowship applications being only open in certain topic areas.

4.8 Council **noted** the update.

5. Infrastructure Roadmap Update (EPSRC 10-20)

5.1 Ms Nicholson introduced this paper which sought endorsement to the proposals recommended by the EPSRC Capital Infrastructure Strategic Advisory Team for submission by EPSRC to the UKRI Infrastructure Advisory Committee (IAC).

5.2 Council **noted** the update and **supported** the proposed bids to be submitted to the UKRI IAC. **Minute not included as contains exempt material, at the time of publication, under the terms of the Freedom of Information Act 2000.**

5.3 **Minute not included as contains exempt material, at the time of publication, under the terms of the Freedom of Information Act 2000.**

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Secretary's Note: Professor Sarah Sharples asked for it to be noted that Nottingham University was leading one of the bids which had been put forward for consideration by the EPSRC Capital Infrastructure Strategic Advisory Team. She therefore did not actively participate in the discussion.

6. EPSRC e-Infrastructure Update (EPSRC 11-20)

6.1 Professor Parsons introduced a status update on EPSRC's e-Infrastructure current provision and activities. He also explained that a new approach to e-Infrastructure strategy is being developed within UKRI joining up individual e-Infrastructure activities across the Research Councils. He said that it was hoped that this will ensure that: i) scientific and industrial research needs are better met including support for greater cross-disciplinary research; ii) e-Infrastructure is delivered most effectively by those with the best expertise to do so; and iii) better utilisation delivers cost savings allowing the research infrastructures to be properly funded (power, people, software, skills). He closed by saying that it was timely therefore that EPSRC's e-Infrastructure programme is reviewed to ensure that future needs are appropriate and are not un-necessarily tied to historic approaches in this area. It was proposed that the review is conducted in two phases. The first phase will include EPS requirements for e-Infrastructure provision and the second phase will cover the EPS contribution to the future e-Infrastructure Landscape.

6.2 Council **welcomed** the update and **endorsed the** plans for the proposed review of EPSRC e-Infrastructure future needs. It felt that the review also provided an opportunity to factor in thinking about data policy, retention and sharing in order to support and complement the AI development work underway.

Secretary's Note: Professor Parsons declared his association with the ARCHER 2 project and the work associated with the next Exascale computing capability although this did not present a direct conflict of interest with this agenda item.

7. Discussion with Professor James Hetherington, UKRI's Director for Digital Research Infrastructure

7.1 Professor Hetherington began by setting out his vision for UKRI's e-infrastructure strategy and his plans for achieving this.

7.2 Council thanked Professor Hetherington and welcomed the opportunity to provide input to the UKRI's future plans for e-Infrastructure. Council asked questions on his key objectives, governance arrangements, international best practice, UKRI's role as a data curator and holder, and opportunities for the EPS community.

7.3 Professor Hetherington left the meeting. In reflecting on the presentation and discussion Council welcomed Professor Hetherington's enthusiasm and supported his aspirations for delivering UKRI's e-Infrastructure strategy. **Minute not included as contains exempt material, at the time of publication, under the terms of the Freedom of Information Act 2000.**

8. Delivery Plan Progress (EPSRC 12-20)

8.1 Dr Bourne introduced the second (previous October 2019) "EPSRC Biannual Progress Report" to Council and provided an overview of progress during the last year towards our new Delivery Plan.

8.2 In the ensuing discussion the focus was primarily on the Healthy Nation and Resilient Nation priorities. Council concluded that the Covid-19 crisis provided a unique opportunity to demonstrate how the agility and multidisciplinary nature of the EPS community in these priority areas had helped in responding to aspects of the crisis. It agreed that EPSRC's

research funding and training strategies over decades and the fundamental baseline capability that this had nurtured had enabled rapid deployment and adaptation of skills to meet these new challenges and had contributed in many ways across a broad spectrum. Some of the specific areas mentioned in relation to the EPS contribution to the immediate management of the crisis were:

i) Covid therapeutics, including scale-up and manufacturing, modelling, materials;
ii) Contribution to the data management: e.g. pandemic statistics handling, managing lock-down/safe distancing/tracing tools.
iii) Digital Economy contributions to privacy aspects.
iv) The digital infrastructure resulting from EPSRC funding which was underpinning a number of activities such as remote working, telecommunications, human-computer interface etc.
v) The adaptability of EPS researchers to switch over to PPE work, and the F1 teams switching to ventilators all of which is testament to world leading engineering base that EPSRC supports.

8.3   Council agreed that these and other EPSRC supported areas would have a key role in rebuilding and developing new capabilities and resilience in a post Covid-19 world. With this in mind Council felt that the Healthy Nation Priority was an area which would benefit from additional stimulus and attention and agreed to create a sub-group of Council members to take this forward.

8.4   Council **noted** the update and **welcomed** the progress that had been made. It particularly urged the Executive to maintain the momentum with the ED&I priority which it felt was especially important in the current environment.

9.   Any Other Business

9.1   Council briefly discussed the Communications Update information paper (EPSRC 13-20). Mr Paul agreed to take on board members' comments on the draft Communications Plan: the need for better differentiation on the audiences we are trying to target, and the need for clear proposals for assessing the effectiveness of the plan. He would also take on board their comments from earlier in the meeting on improving our marketing of EPS contributions to the response to the Covid-19 pandemic.

9.2   **Minute not included as contains exempt material, at the time of publication, under the terms of the Freedom of Information Act 2000.**

9.3   Council **agreed** the messages that should be conveyed from today's meeting in its report to the UKRI Board.

10.   Next Meeting

10.1   Professor Gladden said that the next meeting in July was scheduled to take place at BT Astral Park. She said that given the ongoing uncertainty it had been decided to postpone this to a future date. She indicated that it was likely that the next meeting would also need to be convened virtually. Finally, Professor Gladden said that UKEA had extended an offer to host a future Council meeting and that the Office were looking to see how and when this might be accommodated in the Council meeting schedule.