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UKRI ENGINEERING AND PHYSICAL SCIENCES RESEARCH COUNCIL

EDITED MINUTES OF THE VIRTUAL COUNCIL MEETING HELD ON 06 OCTOBER 2020

Council Members: Professor M E Smith
Professor L Gladden
Professor M Calder
Professor A Etheridge
Professor N Jennings
Professor Sarah Sharples
Dr J de Sousa
Professor I Walmsley
Professor T Whitley
Dr P Williams
Professor A Wright
Professor S Belcher

Executive: Dr L Blackwell
Dr A Bourne
Dr A Chmura
Ms K Daniel
Professor C Deane
Ms S Francis
Dr K Magnay
Mr G Mapstone
Dr L Martin
Ms J Nicholson
Dr K Pandya
Mr A Paul
Dr N Viner
Dr A Wall

Others: Mr Mark Bussey, UKRI
Mrs Siobhan Peters, UKRI (until item 4)

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.
- 1.2 Professor Smith formally opened the meeting. He extended a welcome to Mrs Peters, UKRI CFO, who was attending her first meeting. She had replaced Mr Blackburn as UKRI's representative observer on Council.
- 1.3 No apologies had been received although it was noted that both Professor Walmsley and Professor Jennings would join the meeting later.
- 1.4 There were no new declarations of interest from Council members.

2. Draft Minutes of the Meeting on 07 July 2020

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

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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 not included as contains exempt material, at the time of publication, under the terms of the Freedom of Information Act 2000.**
- ii) Minute 4.1: Ms Nicholson updated Council on some of the emerging lessons learnt and some statistics arising from the recent New Horizons call. In response to a question she said that further analysis would be undertaken to assess the extent to which this call had improved diversity with regards to applicants and institutions, and this would be reported to Council in due course. Finally, she agreed that, in time, it would be useful publish headline data more widely.
- iii) Minute 7.5: Dr Wall confirmed that input on Open Fellowships had been received from Professor Jennings, Professor Etheridge and Dr de Sousa. She thanked them for their very helpful and detailed input. The Open Fellowships guidance is now on the EPSRC website.

4. Executive Update (EPSRC 19-20)

- 4.1 Dr Wall reported on the deliberations of the Doctoral Education Review working-group which had focussed on the pressing issue of the impact of Covid-19 on studentships. She said that the working-group had considered a report based on preliminary data UKRI had collected on the impact of the pandemic and the outputs of conversations EPSRC had held with stakeholders. The group had concluded that, without further investment, Covid-19 may cause a short to medium-term reduction in funds to support new doctoral students. In part this would be as a result of EPSRC, university, and partner funding being prioritised to support current doctoral students due to complete and short-term cash flow issues for some companies. She added that this predicted reduction in the number of new doctoral students starters would be additional to the current expected reduction in student numbers caused by the baseline funding reduction for DTPs and CDTs, while student and other costs are increasing.
- 4.2 **Minute not included as contains exempt material, at the time of publication, under the terms of the Freedom of Information Act 2000.**
- 4.3 Dr Wall closed by saying that a more detailed paper on the precise impact of the pandemic on doctoral studentships was planned for the December Council meeting and that this would draw on further detailed input from university partners.
- 4.4 Council received an update on EPSRC's current and future financial position. **Minute not included as contains exempt material, at the time of publication, under the terms of the Freedom of Information Act 2000.**
- 4.5 Ms Nicholson reported that following the discussion at the May meeting regarding the Infrastructure Roadmap EPSRC had submitted 3 projects to the UKRI Infrastructure Advisory Committee who were scheduled to meet on 25 November 2020. She said that across UKRI, 21 full and 11 preliminary projects had been submitted and while it is still unknown when the next submission round will be, EPSRC are planning to ensure that its future process reflects our ambitions as a Council and will build on the lessons learned from this round. This will likely include building on our Spending Review work e.g. capital requirements for net-zero, and an open call to the community to highlight future opportunities. She reminded Council that World Class Labs (WCL) had long been

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highlighted as a priority for additional capital funding. Following negotiations with BEIS and HMT, UKRI had successfully secured an additional £300m capital investment in WCL in FY20/21, bringing forward infrastructure investment from future years. Delivering this uplift required a swift allocation to Councils in accordance with funding conditions and with consideration to future financial impacts, and EPSRC received £29m of this investment.

- 4.6 Dr Bourne provided Council with a brief update on plans to introduce a short-term international funding programme post Brexit to fill the gap left by ERC grants and to establish a new Discovery Fund. **Minute not included as contains exempt material, at the time of publication, under the terms of the Freedom of Information Act 2000.**
- 4.7 Professor Gladden reported that the process to recruit 3 new Council members was nearing completion and that interviews had been held on 30 September and 01 October and she had been joined on the interview panel by Professor Smith and Dr Karen Salt (UKRI). She said that she had been encouraged by both the quality and diversity of the applicants for this exercise, but this had made the selection process difficult. The Panel had unanimously agreed that there were two standout candidates who should be appointed. The panel were still considering options for filling the third vacancy in order to ensure appropriate diversity on Council. Finally, she reported that the panel recommendations were now subject to the endorsement of the relevant UKRI appointments committee and it was anticipated that this would be made known early in November with the hope that the two new appointees might attend the December Council meeting.
- 4.8 Council **noted** the update.

5. Spending Review (SR) Update

- 5.1 Professor Gladden introduced this item and first thanked Dr Chmura and colleagues for all of their hard work in preparing for the SR. She cautioned that the situation remained fluid and therefore urged Council to focus on the overall direction of travel and concentrate on what EPSRC should aspire to do in the event of different levels of SR settlement. She closed by saying that staff had been charged to be as ambitious as possible in formulating the bid in order to achieve the best possible outcome for EPS. She then handed over to Dr Chmura to provide an overview of both the UKRI submission and the EPSRC bid contained within that.
- 5.2 Dr Chmura said that UKRI had submitted an ambitious high-level bid for Spending Review 2020 (SR2020) into BEIS, covering the Financial Years (FYs) 2021/22 to 2024/25 **Minute not included as contains exempt material, at the time of publication, under the terms of the Freedom of Information Act 2000.**
- 5.3 Dr Chmura reported that the EPSRC bid had been formulated in conjunction with theme leads and input from some Council members and SATs. The bid had requested an overall increase in budget by a greater factor than the indicative Council baseline budget on the premise of the central role EPS will play in economic recovery over the SR and beyond. Therefore, we had framed the submission on an overall ambitious doubling of our FY2020/21 baseline by FY2023/24. She provided a more detailed overview of both the rationale for EPSRC's bid and the detailed elements of that bid.
- 5.4 In the ensuing discussion Council unanimously agreed that this represented a good start to the process and supported both the ambition and scale of the bid and commended those staff who had been involved in the process. It agreed that the bid justifiably reflected the role that EPS research would undoubtedly play in a post Covid-19 national recovery. Furthermore, it felt that it had been pitched appropriately, particularly regarding the balance between the underpinning and translational research aspects. **Minute not included as contains exempt material, at the time of publication, under the terms of the Freedom**

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of Information Act 2000.

6. Delivery Plan Progress (EPSRC 20-20)

- 6.1 Dr Bourne presented this paper which set out an overview of progress against EPSRC's 2019 Delivery Plan during quarters 1 and 2 of the 2020/21 financial year. He reminded Council that they had last discussed progress at the May 2020 meeting and that at that meeting the focus had been on six of the twelve priority areas. This paper therefore focussed on the remaining six areas:
- Connected Nation.
 - Productive Nation.
 - Excellence in People.
 - Business Engagement.
 - Managing our Portfolio.
 - Research Infrastructure Membership.
- 6.2 Council members agreed that the regular detailed updates provided by the Executive to the designated Council members on specific priority areas were most valuable and allowed Council members to have a more in-depth understanding. In direct response to a question Dr Bourne agreed that it was important to shift to more outcome-focussed reporting and said that the Executive were looking closely at this and working with staff to facilitate a new process in order to make this possible.
- 6.3 The following specific comments were made in discussion:
- i) The Fellowships initiative represented a major change for the community and the benefits of this change will pay out over many years to come. It will therefore be important to be able to map and closely monitor and support these over time.
 - ii) It was agreed that it would be timely to showcase case studies, in the coming weeks and months, but not just Covid-19 focussed.
 - iii) Conversely, it would be good to understand how EPS work has been used in the data modelling for the pandemic (RAMP initiative, Isaac Newton initiative, etc.).
 - iv) The Business Engagement priority provided a particular challenge to find the best routes to engagement with the SME community. This could be considered in the context of regional engagement and Innovate UK's role in this. It was noted that TechUK may also provide a route for such engagement.
- 6.4 Council **welcomed** the continued progress in taking forward the Delivery Plan priorities.

7. Closed Session

- 7.1 A closed session was held without the Executive and UKRI representative.
- 7.2 When the Executive returned to the meeting Professor Smith briefly reprised what the closed session had covered: **Minute not included as contains exempt material, at the time of publication, under the terms of the Freedom of Information Act 2000.**

8. Discussion Session with CSAs

- 8.1 In addition to Professor Stephen Belcher (CSA MET Office) who normally attends Council meetings, Council were also joined by Phil Blythe (DfT), Paul Monks (BEIS), and Robert Bradburne (Deputy CSA DEFRA).

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- 8.2 Professor Smith welcomed them to the meeting. He said that this opportunity to meet was particularly timely given that the current SR and the importance afforded to establishing a meaningful partnership between government departments and UKRI.
- 8.3 Dr Pandya then introduced the session and began by providing a summary of EPSRC's SR priorities targeted specifically to the interests of the CSAs at the meeting. He then introduced EPSRC's plans for Clean Environment and Sustainable Growth and closed by inviting the CSAs in turn to present their own strategic funding priorities.
- 8.4 In the discussion which followed a number of common areas of interest emerged including AI, digital twins and data science as well as carbon capture and storage. The CSAs also highlighted the importance of engagement with researchers on policy development. Interactions tended to be with early career academics and could be strengthened at the mid-career stage. They also had experience of Research Council policy fellowships working well. Building on this Dr Pandya agreed to develop further briefing options for CSAs in these areas, working with some Council members as needed. He added that the whole area of Covid-19 pandemic recovery had not really been discussed, but suggested that we might also send CSA colleagues some thoughts from an EPSRC perspective so they might critique this with a view to informing the UKRI endeavour in this area. Finally, it was recognised that Professor Chris Whitty, CSA, DHSC, had expressed interest in engaging with EPSRC Council and that the Executive should respond positively to this.
- 8.5 Professor Gladden added that it would be certainly useful to explore how EPSRC's expertise in some of the common areas of interest that had been identified might be used in partnership across government departments. She suggested that this can either be done on a one-to-one basis or across department or in the form of workshops to showcase each area.
- 8.6 Dr Pandya closed by expressing his thanks to all participants and in particular Professor Belcher who had helped considerably in navigating through the CSA network and in making today's meeting happen.
- 8.7 Professor Smith said that he had found the session informative and interesting. It had been useful to hear the CSA's thoughts on where EPSRC played into the respective Departments and it had highlighted some topics for future discussion and potential collaboration. He added that there were ideas at various levels that had emerged from the discussion, some which were very practical and immediate and others more longer term and he said that he hoped these would be taken forward as part of an ongoing relationship and dialogue with CSAs. He added that the challenge will be how we build on this dialogue and said EPSRC needed to think about how best we make this happen. Dr Pandya agreed to come back to the CSAs with some firm proposals. Professor Smith closed by saying that whilst the session had been useful it perhaps would have worked even better had the meeting been in person which would have allowed for greater facilitation and multiple interaction and that this is something that we should strive to do in the future perhaps in an awayday or workshop environment.
- 8.8 Dr Pandya agreed to circulate the slides from the CSA presentations to Council members after the meeting.
- 8.9 When the CSAs had left the meeting Council took an opportunity to briefly reflect on the session. Council members broadly agreed that this had provided a sound basis and useful starting point for a longer-term series of engagements. It was recognised that while this had been a useful forum for discussion it was also felt that there may be scope for having a buddy system where a couple of Council members were matched with particular departments. This would allow for a more in-depth conversations to happen. Finally, Council agreed that Dr Pandya should take time to distil the key outputs from this

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discussion and come back to the next meeting with a considered summary and proposals for taking this initiative forward. Council stressed that any plan would need to be practicable and, with this in mind, may need to initially focus on engagement with some of the key government departments.

9. EPSRC Risk Register (EPSRC 21-20)

9.1 Mr Paul introduced this paper which set out the biannual report to Council on risk management and EPSRC's risk log. He drew Council's attention to the main risks contained in the UKRI corporate risk register and then described the risks in EPSRC's own risk register. He particularly highlighted the most critical risks which were a direct result of 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 Subject to consideration of the comments set out above Council **endorsed** the Executive view of EPSRC's current risk profile.

10. Any Other Business

10.1 Council noted the Communications Update information paper (EPSRC 22-20).

10.2 Dr Wright asked the Executive if they knew of any progress in setting up the Innovation Expert Panel which was mentioned in the recently published R&D Roadmap. The Executive responded that it had seen the membership of that group but this was not yet in the public domain and that BEIS had been asked for a briefing on progress and this was awaited. It was agreed that there should be an update at the December Council meeting.

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

11. Next Meeting

11.1 Professor Smith said that the next meeting in December would be convened virtually and that the UKRI CEO would be attending.