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UKRI ENGINEERING AND PHYSICAL SCIENCES RESEARCH COUNCIL

EDITED MINUTES OF THE VIRTUAL COUNCIL MEETING HELD ON 07 JULY 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
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
Dr N Viner
Dr A Wall
Mr A Paul
Dr L Martin
Ms K Daniel

Others: Mr Mark Bussey, UKRI
Ms Fiona Driscoll, UKRI Audit Committee Chair

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 Fiona Driscoll, Chair of the UKRI Audit Committee. He invited her to say a few words of introduction. She said that over the next few months she was planning to attend each of the UKRI Council meetings merely to introduce herself and to observe. She briefly explained her role and that of the audit committee in relation to UKRI's governance and assurance framework.
- 1.3 Apologies had been received from Professor Sharples.
- 1.4 There were no new declarations of interest from Council members. Professor Smith urged Council to think about either the positive or negative impacts, if any, on ED&I or sustainability issues for each major business item and to raise this as appropriate.

2. Draft Minutes of the Meeting on 13 May

- 2.1 Council **agreed** the record of the last meeting. Subject to one minor change as follows:

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Minute 8.2(i): Covid therapeutics, including scale-up and manufacturing, modelling, materials.

3. Actions and Matters Arising

3.1 There were six 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 4.3: Professor Gladden reported that the action had been completed. UKRI's Executive Committee had been informed of the intention to contact EPSRC's university partners regarding the issue of matched funding to support research grant applications. An email had been sent to university contacts last week which made clear that unless otherwise stated proposals are judged on their merits and the case is not enhanced by a university contribution. She said that EPSRC would follow up with them on this point in the upcoming quarterly discussions and intended to promulgate this message further through the Peer Review College newsletters. She also urged Council members to use their own networks to disseminate this message. In response to a question Professor Gladden said that the subject of matched funding had not been discussed at a UKRI level and that the focus had primarily been on the threat to matched funding provided by charities and business. She agreed to flag this specific issue and EPSRC's response in the UKRI Board report from this meeting and to propose that a more general UKRI statement on this matter would also be helpful.
- ii) Minute 7.3: Dr Goldberg confirmed that a meeting of a sub-group of Council members to assist with EPSRC's input to the UKRI e-Infrastructure strategy had been arranged.
- iii) Minute 8.2: Dr Pandya confirmed that a meeting of a sub-group of Council members to help provide further stimulus and focus on the Healthy Nation Priority area had been convened. He briefly highlighted the key messages emerging from the initial deliberations. He closed by saying that the sub-group would report back to Council in October.
- iv) Minute 9.2: Dr Goldberg confirmed that the dual use technologies issue would be brought back to Council in December along with a broader paper covering responsible innovation. Professor Gladden added that she had recently been made SRO for the UKRI's new Trusted Research Theme and that a Group would be convened to take this forward. She confirmed that Council members would have the opportunity to engage with the work of the Group in due course and agreed to follow this up with UKRI colleagues. It was noted that Professor Wright, Professor Whitley, Dr Williams and Professor Jennings were prepared to represent EPSRC in this regard.

4. Executive Update (EPSRC 14-20)

4.1 Ms Daniel provided a further update on the UKRI and specifically EPSRC sponsored research effort in response to the Covid-19 pandemic. Dr Viner then provided an update on the ongoing operational impact. He provided a specific overview of the recently announced costed grant extension allocation and its relationship to the emerging stability package. He also briefly explained the work that was in-hand regarding business continuity and the continuing pressures on staff. Council were also alerted to the burgeoning pressures on peer review. Dr Viner reported that responsive mode applications had maintained their normal levels and on top of this EPSRC had received over 1000 proposals in response to the recent New Horizons call, around 100 proposals per month through the Covid-19 call, and had seen a sizeable increase in Future Leader Fellow applications (~74%). He said that this not only placed pressure on an already stretched staff resource, but on reviewers too. Council noted the situation and asked to be kept apprised of developments. Finally, Council acknowledged that it was encouraging to see the vibrancy of the EPS community

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and thanked EPSRC staff for dealing so admirably with this unprecedented increase in grant demand in addition to coping with the additional pressures associated with the pandemic. In response to a request Ms Nicholson agreed to provide Council with an overview of the quality of the New Horizons research grant proposals.

- 4.2 Council were then briefly appraised of developments associated with the Spending Review and then had a more detailed presentation and discussion regarding the recently published R&D Roadmap. Professor Gladden said that the development of the R&D Roadmap was a direct response to the announcement to increase public expenditure on R&D to £22bn per year by 2024. The roadmap described how the Government will maximise the returns on investment across the whole R&D system to build on the UK's strengths, learn lessons from the sector's response to Covid-19, and ensure that we make the bold changes needed to ensure our system is fit for purpose now and for the future. In the ensuing discussion Council broadly welcomed the roadmap and its aspirations but recognised that there would need to be extensive work and engagement in order to establish the precise delivery mechanisms. It concluded that it would be crucial to develop an extensive R&D ecosystem supporting both basic and applied research, which works with big business as well as start-ups and SMEs. It also felt that the importance of the university base was currently not sufficiently acknowledged in the publication, especially given that it provided a vital source of economic and social benefit for the whole nation. Council stressed the importance that universities play in any R&D ecosystem particularly with regards to education, training and driving value from research. **Minute not included as contains exempt material, at the time of publication, under the terms of the Freedom of Information Act 2000.**
- 4.3 Professor Gladden said she had recently met with Professor Leyser, UKRI's new CEO. She briefly set out the main points discussed including ED&I and the issue of ongoing funding for institutes. She informed Council that it was hoped that Professor Leyser would join Council at its December meeting, which Council welcomed.
- 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 Dr Goldberg reported that the exercise to recruit new Council members was proceeding according to plan and interviews were set for September. She said that the scale, quality and diversity of the pool of applicants had been encouraging. She added that positive action was planned across UKRI to improve BAME diversity in both the longlisting and shortlisting stages and further plans were in hand to improve the diversity of the interview panels.
- 4.6 Professor Smith reported that he had attended a meeting of all Councils' Senior Independent Members (SIMs) and briefly outlined the items discussed.
- 4.7 Mr Bussey was invited to provide a brief UKRI update on any issues he thought would be of interest to Council. He reported that of the 40 spaces initially available in Polaris House when the building reopens in July only 18 applications had been received to date. He also said that there was a formal requirement for UKRI to periodically produce and submit a Corporate Plan to BEIS. The first Corporate Plan was being developed and would be submitted in September to cover 20/21.
- 4.8 Council **noted** the update.

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5. Place (EPSRC 15-20)

- 5.1 Dr Bourne introduced this paper which set out recommendations from a Strategic Advisory Network (SAN) workstream on the inclusion of Place within EPSRC's long term strategy. It also set out some guiding principles on how EPSRC should deliver Place, and ideas for funding initiatives and associated portfolio management activities.
- 5.2 As background he reminded Council that it had last discussed Place in July 2017. At that meeting Council had agreed that there was a need to think about the role of, and interplay between, skills and impact innovation in a Place-based agenda. They had also discussed the importance of being part of a complex ecosystem and having 'joined-up' strategies. However, Council had noted the risk that EPSRC's commitment to excellence might be deprioritised and they stressed the need for excellence to be balanced with the need to demonstrate benefits into the local economy. He added that since then, there had been a clear drive from UK Government to engage with Place and this had been reflected in UKRI's own strategy development and the recent R&D roadmap. In order to develop EPSRC's own thinking in this regard a SAN workstream had been commissioned.
- 5.3 Ms Daniel reported that the SAN Group had broadly concluded that EPSRC should adopt Place as a new aspect of its long-term strategy augmenting the existing delivery plan. It agreed that the adoption of Place should set out to enable individual regions across the UK to realise their potential to drive innovation-led economic growth and to facilitate research connectivity between institutions. Finally, she described several options and approaches set out by the SAN Group which might be adopted to achieve this aspiration.
- 5.4 **Minute not included as contains exempt material, at the time of publication, under the terms of the Freedom of Information Act 2000.**
- 5.5 Council welcomed the work of the SAN Group. **Minute not included as contains exempt material, at the time of publication, under the terms of the Freedom of Information Act 2000.** It broadly endorsed the recommendations and stressed that the adoption of a Place strategy should provide a systems solution which enables universities, alongside other partners, to drive innovation-led economic growth and facilitate research connectivity between institutions. However, Council acknowledged that this was a complex endeavour with care needed in its implementation to ensure it complements our mission to support research excellence and aligns with the broader UKRI approach. It also agreed that there may be merit in looking at how other countries have implemented Place-type interventions. Finally, Council noted that a further paper regarding the implementation strategy would be presented to the December meeting.

6. UKRI Clean and Sustainable Growth and the Energy Deep Dive (EPSRC 17-20)

- 6.1 Dr Kedar Pandya introduced this item which covered two interrelated policy areas (i) UKRI's Clean and Sustainable Growth proposition and (ii) EPSRC-UKRI's further work on the Energy Deep Dive. He took this opportunity to particularly thank Dr Martin and colleagues for the work they had put in in compiling the paper and preparing for this discussion.
- 6.2 The first session provided an opportunity for Council to prepare for a discussion with Professor Duncan Wingham, NERC Executive Chair, who along with Professor Gladden, is the joint UKRI Board sponsor for Clean Environment and Sustainable Growth investment proposition.
- 6.3 Council were then joined by Professor Wingham. Professor Smith welcomed him on behalf of Council. He said that this provided a valuable and timely opportunity to engage in this debate, especially given the importance that the engineering and physical sciences would undoubtedly play in taking forward this important endeavour.

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- 6.4 Professor Wingham responded by saying a few words about the context and the work underway to formulate UKRI's Clean Environment and Sustainable Growth investment proposition. He particularly acknowledged the work that EPSRC had already delivered through the Energy Theme which provided a sound platform from which to address this challenge. There followed a round table discussion which covered a wide range of associated topics including the international context, energy demand management, future alternative energy options, stakeholder engagement and the forthcoming spending review.
- 6.5 Professor Smith closed this session by thanking Professor Wingham for attending. He said that Council had been encouraged by the inclusivity of the proposition as described by Professor Wingham and that it recognised the vital contributions to be made by many Councils in this endeavour. Finally, it was mutually agreed that it would be useful for Professor Wingham to attend a future Council meeting at an appropriate point in order to discuss developments.
- 6.6 Professor Wingham left the meeting.
- 6.7 Council welcomed the opportunity to meet with Professor Wingham and discuss the UKRI's net zero and sustainability agenda including the positioning of EPSRC's Energy theme. It noted that EPSRC had both existing and future capabilities in both the supply and demand aspects which particularly complemented the wider resilience and sustainability effort across UKRI and welcomed the opportunity to work and engage with UKRI partners in taking this forward. Council recognised that the overall UKRI delivery routes had yet to be defined and much would depend on the outcome of the SR. It therefore agreed that, for the interim, EPSRC should press ahead in identifying the specific areas that it felt best able to pursue and to establish the appropriate ecosystem for delivering these.
- 7. Developing the EPSRC Open Fellowship (EPSRC 16-20)**
- 7.1 Professor Smith began by reminding Council that, at the last meeting, it had received an update on the ongoing review of Fellowships and had also provisionally approved two key elements of the proposed new approach to move to EPSRC Open Fellowships prior to the completion of the review. These changes were:
- i) The removal of career stages (Early Career and Established Career, but keeping Postdoctoral).
 - ii) The end of research area restrictions on Fellowships except for Postdoctoral Fellows.
- 7.2 Before leaving the meeting Professor Smith said that he welcomed the direction of travel, but care was needed that bureaucracy did not increase as a result of these changes. Professor Smith handed over to Professor Gladden to chair the rest of the meeting.
- 7.3 Dr Wall explained that, based on the outcome of the review, the paper now more fully described the proposed new 'Open' EPSRC Fellowship to replace and expand the current Fellowship scheme. It described the rationale, main design features, and outline plans for implementation. She took this opportunity to thank all those who had contributed to the work in developing this paper.
- 7.4 She said that the proposed Open and Open Plus Fellowships offered a new vision which enabled researchers to design a fellowship to fit their research ideas, their career stage, development needs and leadership aspirations. Also, for the first time, EPSRC would be providing ongoing fellowship opportunities for people who want to focus on innovation or instrument/technique development or to champion an area of research citizenship. She emphasised that EPSRC had taken account of the feedback arising from the consultation exercise in designing the new approach.

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- 7.5 Professor Etheridge, who had participated in the peer review workshop that had been convened to discuss these changes reported that there had been wide-ranging support for the proposals, in particular the removal of career stages which it was felt would aid EDI aspects. She said that there had been some caution expressed that the introduction of open fellowships should not be allowed to compromise the paramount priority of supporting excellent research. It was also recognised that the selection process would be more difficult, especially when making direct comparison with people at different career stages and with different skills. It was felt that further explicit guidance would be required for both peer reviewers and interview panels in this regard. This provided a timely opportunity to reappraise the interview process and learn from best practice elsewhere.
- 7.6 In the ensuing discussion Council agreed that, overall, this was a progressive and welcome change. Council fully supported the new approach subject to reconsidering the need for the separate “plus” scheme. It agreed that the “plus” element could be accommodated within a single “open” call, but recognised that care would be needed to ensure that the different facets of the “plus” element remain evident and are peer reviewed appropriately. Dr Wall responded by saying that work would now commence to effect this change and she agreed to discuss her plans with a sub-set of Council members (Professor Etheridge, Professor Jennings and Dr de Sousa) to ensure that this is progressing in line with Council's expectations.

8. Any Other Business

- 8.1 Council briefly discussed the Communications Update information paper (EPSRC 18-20).
- 8.2 Professor Belcher asked for an update on progress with the SPF Wave 3 and how the CSA network could be engaged as part of that process. Professor Gladden responded by saying the plans for the next SPF Wave had yet to be announced and would no doubt be wrapped up in the subsequent SR deliberations and outcome. However, she said that, in the spirit of the recently published roadmap, timely good ideas should not necessarily have to wait for funding opportunities presented by calls such as the SPF and ISCF. She cited the recent example of the transport bid which had been developed in conjunction with government departments and facilitated through the CSA network, culminating in an excellent proposal. She said that EPSRC would continue to seek opportunities to work with CSAs and government departments to develop future collaborative projects and said that she would commend this approach to the rest of UKRI. Council fully supported this strategy and looked forward to meeting with CSAs later in the year to discuss this further. Dr Goldberg agreed to progress plans for this meeting with Dr Pandya.
- 8.3 Professor Wright briefly reported on progress with the Doctoral Education Review that was underway. He explained that the Covid-19 pandemic had impacted on the timeline for this activity and that it was anticipated that the outcome of the full review would be reported to Council in March 2020. However, he said that the working group felt that there was a more pressing need for a separate paper which provides a response to the short- and medium-term impacts of Covid-19 on studentships and the potential longer-term impacts that may cause in the EPS sector. It was agreed that this would be presented to the December 2020 Council meeting with an interim update at the October 2020 meeting.
- 8.4 Council **agreed** the messages that should be conveyed from today's meeting in its report to the UKRI Board.

9. Next Meeting

- 9.1 Professor Gladden said that the next meeting in October would be convened virtually.