

# 03a

Author: Ivan Pavlov

## Minutes of the Council business meeting, held at De Vere Wokefield Estate, Reading, on 6 July 2022

Attendees		
MRC Council	Executive Board	MRC Head Office / observers
John Iredale	Robin Buckle	Rachel Benny
Richard Murley	Patrick Chinnery	Kathryn Jackson
Jill Pell	Hugh Dunlop	Ivan Pavlov
Munir Pirmohamed	Claire Newland	Abbie Twidell
Eleanor Riley	Jonathan Pearce	Bryony Butland (as a UKRI observer)
Irene Tracey	Susan Simon	
Pauline Williams		<b>Guests</b>
		Kate Aylett (Item 7)
		Megan Dowie (Item 6)
		Ottoline Leyser (Item 9)
		Gavin Mapstone (Items 4 & 5)
		Jan Löwe (Item 6)

### 1. Welcome and Apologies

The Council business meeting on 6 July 2022 was held at the De Vere Wokefield Estate in Reading with some members joining via Zoom videoconference. The meeting was chaired by the Senior Independent Member of Council, Mr Richard Murley.

Apologies were received from Roger Highfield, Graham Spittle, Precious Lunga, Andy Richards, Louise Wood and Charlotte Watts. Some members, guests and observers joined the meeting virtually.

### 2. Register of declared interests

Mr Murley asked members to send any updated declarations to the secretariat.

### 3. Minutes of the Council business meeting held on 4 May 2022

The minutes of the Council business meeting held on 4 May 2022 were approved as an accurate record of the meeting.

### 4. Finance report

Mr Gavin Mapstone, the MRC interim Finance Director, presented the finance report, which laid out which budget allocations had been confirmed so far. Mr Mapstone noted that a number of 2022/23 budget allocations, including those related to the Official Development Assistance (ODA) and some UKRI cross-cutting programmes, were yet to be made by UKRI. Allocations for BEIS-managed International programmes were also awaiting confirmation. Council was pleased to learn that the MRC Executive Chair would be the Senior Responsible Officer (SRO) for delivery of the £75 million Health, Ageing & Wellbeing

strategic theme that will be taken forward across UKRI. Members were informed that there would be future opportunities for MRC, as it was likely to receive additional allocations from cross-cutting programmes once they commence delivery.

The paper presented to Council also covered the MRC's extramural commitment budget for 2022/23 and year-to-date results. Mr Mapstone informed Council that historically MRC delivered close to allocations at the year end and with the current net expenditure being just 1.4 per cent lower than budget, initial expectations were that MRC was well placed to do so in 2022/23 as well. It was noted, however, that the disruptions to research brought by the pandemic and other factors, resulted in a larger than usual disconnect between the commitment and spend budgets over the past two years, returning underspends in 2021/22. Whilst these conditions were not expected to repeat in the current financial year, the next agenda item provided Council with an overview of rapid spend funding options that MRC could utilise should an underspend arise again.

### **5. Rapid spend funding tools (past and future)**

Mr Mapstone presented Council a range of rapid spend options as a framework that could be used to prioritise particular mechanisms in response to accumulated underspend and unanticipated fiscal events outwit MRC's core budget allocation. The outlined options fell into two groups, those that transfer the capacity created by the underspend into future years and those that utilise the underspend now to fund activity that did not fall within the MRC's initial plan for the financial year. Mr Mapstone pointed out that the latter category was less preferable from the strategic point of view and that the most effective options were those that bring forward spend, which MRC was forecasting to pay in future years, into the present year. Those former options were now enabled by the multi-year spending review settlement, which was not available when MRC/UKRI received only yearly budget allocations.

Options for transferring funding into future years included internal reprofiling, re-negotiating the pattern of spend on the jointly funded initiatives with other funders, and having bespoke spend profiles for MRC's commitments to its strategic investments.

In-year options to utilise underspends would include investment in equipment and infrastructure (including in MRC's flagship investments), flexible supplements to Doctoral Training Partnerships, increased funding for Impact Accelerator Accounts, funding various access and licensing costs on behalf of the MRC community. The options varied in terms of the value of the potential spend, limitations and their strategic fit. The underspend challenges were not unique to MRC, and UKRI was also developing a range of options. Council was informed that funding of studentships through Doctoral Training Partnerships required a UKRI-wide approach to avoid disparity across disciplines, and it was something the UKRI central team was looking into.

Members commented, referring back to the discussion on levelling-up at the joint meeting of Council and Strategy Board the day before, that place should also be a consideration within any rapid spend decisions so that additional funding did not reinforce or create a geographical disbalance.

It was noted that the demand of the MRC equipment calls substantially exceeds the availability of funding. Members suggested that if any applicants were placed on a reserve list, they should be made aware of their position, which would enable them to quickly submit their updated requests should funding due to underspends elsewhere become available. This would help to ensure a quick turnaround, as the lead times for purchasing certain equipment could be as long as 12 weeks. An opportunity to help address the levelling-up agenda through this mechanism was highlighted.

Council was concerned that the potential impacts of non-association with the Horizon Europe programme remained a source of the ongoing uncertainty but recognised that this was outside of the UKRI's control and could bring both challenges and opportunities. Council expressed its view that the association with the European programme would be beneficial for

the UK's research community. Members suggested that efforts to achieve it should continue, including through leveraging wider community engagement, for example, MRC's relationships with learned societies, and relaying the views of the community to decision makers.

In case the association with Horizon Europe does not happen, it might be expected that UKRI/councils receive additional allocations in the current financial year. These could be challenging to spend if notification did not happen until later in the financial year. A risk that extra funding might gradually reduce over the years was mentioned as an additional downside of this scenario.

Overall, Council members were reassured that the head office had a range of financial and operational approaches to actively manage and prioritise rapid spend if need be.

## **6. The MRC Laboratory for Molecular Biology's equality, diversity and inclusion action plan**

The Director of the MRC Laboratory of Molecular Biology (LMB), Dr Jan Löwe, joined the meeting to present Council with an action plan proposed by the Institute to work on its equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) culture. Dr Löwe stressed that LMB considers itself as a diverse institution, particularly with regard to its international workforce, which consisted of more than 50 per cent of staff born outside of the UK.

The Director acknowledged that while efforts to improve gender balance were made throughout the past funding period, the EDI report prepared as part of the last year's quinquennial review of the Institute continued to highlight a considerable gender imbalance of the Institute's staff at certain career stages, while a number of other issues needed to be addressed to support a robust the EDI culture more broadly. The proposed action plan aimed to address those issues in a focused and concerted manner in order to make LMB a fairer and more inclusive workplace. Dr Löwe outlined seven main areas of focus within the plan, highlighting some of the key actions. The Director presented plans to address gender balance among tenured Programme Leads through an improved recruitment process and targeted retention activities to keep and develop a cadre of female scientists, including junior group leaders. This would be complemented by a strategy to improve representation of women among senior appointments at the Institute; actions to publicise the external recognition of LMB female scientists; as well as improving conditions for parents and carers, as difficulties to arrange childcare was among issues that had negative impact on the EDI parameters.

Talking about the LMB's contribution to improve ethnic and socioeconomic diversity at all career stages, Dr Löwe highlighted summer placements and work experiences for undergraduates and young adults from under-privileged backgrounds, as well as the LMB's participation in a very successful school outreach programme. The Director noted that early school interventions were among the most effective ones to address ethnicity imbalances.

Among other activities and actions, the Director mentioned a new fellowship for early career scientists from a black heritage background, structured mentoring system (including reverse mentoring), reporting of the pay gap data, participation in EDIS (Equality, Diversity and Inclusion in Science and Health - a coalition led by Wellcome) and other partnerships, apprenticeship programmes, formalised induction process, and exit interviews.

To aid the implementation of the proposed action plan, the LMB has employed a new EDI Champion, Louise Atkin, who would join the Institute from 25 July 2022.

At the end of the presentation, Dr Löwe thanked colleagues from the LMB, the Wellcome Sanger Institute, the MRC's Training and Careers team, and other expert individuals for their help and support in shaping the action plan.

Members asked Dr Löwe why the LMB struggled to improve gender balance at the more senior level and how he was planning to address the lack of women on the Executive Committee of the Institute. The Director explained that the pay and conditions of tenured posts the LMB could offer were proving less competitive than employment packages able to be offered at comparable institutes. As a result, the Institute struggled to recruit or retain more senior female scientists. Dr Löwe noted that LMB's female researchers were also very successful in obtaining external funding, including various fellowships, which contributed to the gender structure of staff directly employed by the LMB. The Director reiterated how the LMB had directed its attention at the Programme Leader Track career stage, where they were able to recruit excellent women and help develop them into leaders.

Council advised the Director that having established a good support system for female scientists at earlier career stages, the LMB should be more ambitious when addressing gender balance of the Executive Committee. Members suggested that improving the visibility of women in senior leadership positions might make these posts more attractive for potential candidates and advised the Director to consider how to raise the profile of their senior female scientists.

Council thanked Dr Löwe for his presentation and recognised his personal commitment as Director to enhance the LMB's EDI culture. Members commended the positive and proactive approach of the LMB to improve gender and ethnic diversity, develop inclusive recruitment and onboarding practices, and active participation of the Institute in EDI networks across MRC investments. Council wished the Director well in taking the proposed action plan forward.

## **7. MRC Stakeholder Engagement update**

Ms Kate Aylett, MRC Head of Strategic Engagement, provided Council with an overview of the MRC stakeholder engagement activities over the past year, as well as of the future priorities. Members were informed that the office had expanded its engagement across the MRC research community establishing programmes that would reach a wider and more diverse audience. Several activities were instigated that were aimed to build a research culture that would recognise and benefit from the value of public engagement, and to inspire medical scientists to more actively involve public in their research.

Future activities of the engagement team would focus on helping to implement the new MRC Strategic Delivery Plan. Ms Aylett highlighted a few areas that her team would be concentrating on. Those included supporting activities that underpin priorities of the place agenda, and forming the basis of future industry partnerships to advance innovation, maximise translation and drive the development of new therapies and innovative technologies. Internally, the team would continue their ongoing work to provide connectivity across UKRI and the MRC head office, supporting the council's evolving identity within UKRI and seeking to improve how we operate as an organisation.

Council noted the key achievements in 2021/22 and future plans of the team. Members commented that broadening the geographical reach should be actively pursued and should help MRC to encourage applications from outside of the 'golden triangle'. Members were informed that the head office actively engages with over 20 universities through its strategic university visits programme. The frequency of strategic interactions with universities had been increased to two per year, and there were plans to expand this engagement beyond university senior management. It was noted, however, that the engagement team operated under tight resource constraints.

Concluding the discussion, Council thanked the team for their hard work and endorsed the proposed future plans, acknowledging the limited resources the team had to realise the MRC ambitions.

## **8. EDI and environmental sustainability considerations in decision making**

Members noted a good and productive discussion on the LMB EDI action plan and had no further comments with regard to other items considered at the meeting.

## **9. Update from Dame Ottoline Leyser**

UKRI Chief Executive, Professor Dame Ottoline Leyser, joined the meeting to have a dialogue with members of Council. Dame Ottoline updated members on the state of the process of the MRC Executive Chair public appointment, noting that the process - driven and controlled by BEIS - was very thorough, with a lot of efforts going into the identification and selection of the suitable candidates for this post.

Dame Ottoline then described how UKRI engaged in the independent review of UKRI led by Sir David Grant. She expressed her satisfaction by the way this engagement happened, including the involvement of the central hub staff and members of individual Councils to help Sir David to reach his independent judgement.

Members were informed that the outcome and recommendations of the review would provide a further impetus for the changes that UKRI were implementing to become more effective an organisation. Ongoing work, overseen by the UKRI's Executive Committee, on streamlining UKRI business to deliver a more linked up operation and service, was divided into ten workstreams and included for example, delivering infrastructure funding, improving enabling services and replacing outdated data systems (such as Je-S). Dame Ottoline stressed that for continued success, it was important to demonstrate that UKRI as a whole provides a better delivery mechanism than its individual parts. Overall, it was expected that the recommendations would be published later in July 2022 and though challenging, would not be disruptive for the organisation of UKRI, focusing on the efficiencies within the current structure.

Dame Ottoline also mentioned two other relevant reviews that took a broader view across the sector: the Tickell Review of research bureaucracy, calling for a more standardized approach to research funding, and the Nurse Review of the research, development and innovation (RDI) organisational landscape, which would be published in the autumn. The recommendations of those reviews would also help shaping the future of UKRI and its place in the UK's research and innovation landscape.

Dame Ottoline mentioned that the UKRI Board was reviewing the Terms of Reference of UKRI councils' Councils in order to clarify their position in the UKRI governance structure, focusing on the advisory role and the provision of strategic input by these Bodies for their respective councils, as well as on using that expertise more efficiently across the entire organisation. Members pointed out that reducing the size of Councils, as initially suggested, would be detrimental to their advisory capacity, since it would mean less diverse views around the table. Dame Ottoline said that the argument had been heard and there would be no pressure to reduce the size of Council.

Members were then updated on the current situation regarding the UK's association with the Horizon Europe programme and UKRI plans to deal with different outcome scenarios. If there was a pivot in government's thinking, UKRI need to be able to react very quickly in order to stabilise the research ecosystem, for example through providing block grants to organisations that used to get funding from the Horizon Europe. There would also be a need for long-term alternatives able to substitute functions and benefits that this European programme provided. Dame Ottoline recognised community frustration that due to the ongoing uncertainty, UKRI was unable to provide clarity to its community on what was

happening. She said that the current goal was to develop concrete plans before the summer recess of the Parliament to open a conversation and engagement with the community.

Council raised concerns that in case of non-association with the Horizon Europe programme and additional substantial budget allocations to UKRI, councils would be pressured to spend those funds with very tight timelines. Members were worried that potential changes in the Government might further prolong the uncertainty.

Dame Ottoline thanked Professor Iredale and Dr Pearce for their contribution in coordinating work related to the delivery of the missions articulated in the UK Life Sciences Vision by the Office for Life Sciences; and particularly, for their collaborative attitude and joining up with the NIHR.

Other topics discussed with Council included questions related to the establishment of the free-standing independent UK Committee on Research Integrity (UK CORI). Dame Ottoline said that UK CORI, initially hosted by UKRI, had been created following the Science and Technology Committee enquiry, primarily, to address an important issue of reproducibility in research. The issue attracted a lot of political attention but to resolve it more general upstream interventions aimed to improve research culture would be required, including appropriate training and support for research staff. Two co-chairs of the Committee had been recently appointed - Professor Rachael Gooberman-Hill and Professor Andrew George.

Council asked Dame Ottoline about the longer-term vision of the UKRI structure and relationship between its constituent parts. She responded that as UKRI delivers on its mission it would be capturing the benefits of having one organisation. There were a number of strategic themes where it already had demonstrated the advantages of a joined-up approach, for example in addressing environmental sustainability, aging, anti-microbial resistance, and in creating new multidisciplinary response mode funding opportunities that would go beyond what individual councils can offer. Yet, the key question would be if this is the best way to address the needs and serve the interests of the UK's research and innovation community.

Council thanked Dame Ottoline for the update and expressed its gratitude to the MRC and UKRI teams for their hard collaborative work.

## **10. Any other business**

Professor John Iredale updated Council on the situation with monkeypox, which at the moment was largely restricted to particular communities at some cities. Similar outbreaks were registered in other countries, but despite the concerns overall, the situation was very different from that during the COVID pandemic.

Members learnt that a senior and tactical action groups were set up to address issues related to the outbreak, and a £3.5m fund was set up to commission work that would include genomic testing (led by the Pirbright Institute) and support behavioural interventions, for which the ESRC expertise was brought in. Council was informed that there were active negotiations with the NIHR on the joint working in this area. Council agreed that commissioning work and engaging capabilities provided by the UKRI strategic investments into institutes was an appropriate strategy at the current stage. Members expressed their hope that case numbers will drop but noted that while there seemed to be sufficient resources to address challenges faced by the UK at the moment, more research supported by the main biomedical funders was

needed in the developing world to accrue better knowledge of the disease and the ways it spreads.

**11. Council private business**

Following the meeting members held a private business meeting.

*Items for Information*

Council noted the following papers for information:

**12. Health and Safety, security, and resilience annual report**

**13. Operations updates: dashboards**

**14. Updates from the Executive**

**15. Future agenda items**