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Minutes of the Council business meeting, held at the University of Birmingham, on 5 October 2022

Attendees		
MRC Council	Executive Board	MRC Head Office/Observers
John Iredale	Rob Buckle	Stella Child
Richard Murley (Chair)	Patrick Chinnery	Kathryn Jackson
Precious Lunga	Hugh Dunlop	Ivan Pavlov
Jill Pell	Claire Newland	Jessica Dixon (Item 6)
Munir Pirmohamed	Jonathan Pearce	Toni-Jo Henderson (Item 6)
Andy Richards	Susan Simon	
Eleanor Riley		Guests
Pauline Williams		Gavin Mapstone
Louise Wood		Carole Walker (Item 6)
		Isobel Stephen (Item 7)
		Louisa Rahemtulla (Item 8)

1. Welcome and Apologies

The Council business meeting on 5 October 2022 was held at the University of Birmingham 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, Irene Tracey, and Kim Graham. 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 6 July 2022

The minutes of the joint meeting of Council and Strategy Board held on 5 July 2022, and Council business meeting held on 6 July 2022 were approved as an accurate record of the meetings.

4. Finance report

Mr Gavin Mapstone, the MRC Finance Director, presented the finance report, which laid out which budget allocations had been confirmed so far and which were yet expected to be made, noting that MRC secured access to additional funding made available to UKRI by the

Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (BEIS). Council was informed that overall MRC remains on track to deliver against its core research allocation for 2022/23. Mr Mapstone presented a forward look at financial risks and opportunities, including some volatility in the grant portfolio and slippage in World Class Labs funding, but noted that it was expected to be resolved.

A summary of the impacts of inflation on the MRC funding was considered. Mr Mapstone noted that there was accumulating evidence for the impacts of inflation, and that work was ongoing within the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (BEIS) and UKRI to understand the inflationary pressures and policy choices available to address them. Given the increase to the commitment budget proposed for the financial year 2023/24, increases to grant costs should not result in a reduction of the success rates in the near term.

Members of Council supported plans to assess the exposure of MRC investments to the increases in energy costs and mitigating measures.

UKRI plans to increase studentship stipends by 10 per cent have been approved, to be funded in the short term by the underspend in the Future Leaders Fellowships (FLF) programme, with a cost of £70m this financial year and £75m in 2023/24. In the longer term, UKRI will be reviewing its ability to maintain studentship numbers at the current levels. The slippage on FLF was largely caused by the decision to revise the timescales for Rounds 7 and 8 of the scheme. UKRI is discussing its offering to support PhD studies more broadly. Council supported the increase in stipend, noting that the current level risked students dropping out of their studies due to economic pressures.

5. Science Commitment Budget

Dr Robin Buckle, MRC Chief Science Officer, then presented an outline plan for the proposed science commitment budget for 2023/24, noting the current political and structural uncertainties round the overarching fiscal position. Accordingly, allocations were mostly unchanged from 2022/23 to provide stability going forward. The impact of Unit 2.0 transition costs and, if required, the details of any Horizon Europe alternative funding would be discussed at a later meeting.

Council members discussed the prospective allocation for the Major Investment Board (MIB) to support the new Unit 2.0 funding. It was expected the MIB would be able to fund two de novo units in the first call, with decisions made toward the end of the next financial year. The allocation for this is in addition to the allocation for the existing unit portfolio.

Members were supportive of the proposed allocations, noting that the financial levels provided via an uplift to Training and Careers funding of 30 per cent and response mode funding by 18 per cent made in 2022/23 would be maintained in the next year's budget.

6. Biannual Risk Review

Ms Carole Walker, UKRI Head of Risk and Assurance Management, attended to present the biannual risk review, including information on the top MRC and UKRI corporate risks, as well as an in-depth overview of security risks and the UKRI security risk categories.

Council discussed whether there should be an MRC risk associated with the delivery of Horizon Europe alternatives. Ms Walker confirmed that this was recognised as a risk across UKRI but that councils would have different exposures, for instance because life and medical sciences would likely be major beneficiaries should additional funding be directed to UKRI. Ms Walker agreed that it was timely to look at what elements of the risk lie with MRC.

Council was informed that the London Institute of Medical Sciences (LMS) is expected to complete its move into the new building by 2 November, but the risk remained open as the animal facility in the building was behind schedule for Home Office validation.

Members noted the activities undertaken by Head Office to manage the security risks presented in the paper. Council was pleased to note that Head Office was continuing to engage with the regulator, Animals in Science Regulatory Unit (ASRU), and the newly created Animals in Science Policy Unit, to receive updates on the ASRU's organisational change programme, and to monitor the situation with the license processing times to avoid any major interruptions to studies supported by MRC.

7. Independent Review of UKRI

Ms Isobel Stephen, UKRI Executive Director for Strategy, Performance and Engagement, discussed the outcome and actions arising from the Independent Review of UKRI (informally known as the 'Grant Review'). Ms Stephen noted that UKRI Executive was generally pleased with the outcome of the review, which was the result of working closely with Sir David Grant and the BEIS team. The report endorsed the fundamental model of UKRI and the existing number of its constituent councils, but suggested looking at the balance between the central Corporate Hub and the councils, as well as the interaction, relationships and split of responsibilities between council's councils and the UKRI Board. It was noted that the actions arising from the review, as well as those from the review of research bureaucracy, led by Professor Adam Tickell, would be brought under the existing programmes of the new UKRI-wide Operating Model, SHARP (the Services for HR, Accounting, Reporting and Procurement), and Simpler and Better Funding, to avoid creating another separate body of work. Some elements were already addressed as part of the UKRI Corporate Plan for 2022-2025 and councils' Strategic Delivery Plans (SDPs).

Council confirmed that it was comfortable with the existing interaction with UKRI Board, and discussed the timetable and metrics by which the recommendations of the Independent Review of UKRI would be addressed. The ten workstreams that would help to deliver the new UKRI Operating Model had been clearly defined and were well underway, and performance metrics that are matched to SDPs and UKRI Corporate Plan would be discussed by UKRI Board in November. Ms Stephens noted that the work to implement the ten workstreams would carry into the 2023 calendar year.

Members encouraged UKRI to continue to demonstrate to government the essential strategic work performed by councils and UKRI for the UK's research and innovation sector. Council members particularly noted the work done by MRC in partnership with the rest of the life and health sciences sector, to set priorities and ensure that high quality, impactful science is funded to drive economic growth.

8. Horizon Europe Association

Dr Louisa Rahemtulla, MRC Head of European and International Relations, updated Council on the progress toward developing alternatives in the event of non-association with Horizon Europe, with both short- and medium-term options presented.

In the short term, this includes a proposed extension of support for successful applicants to Horizon Europe schemes, with additional provision made to provide assessment for those applications undergoing assessment at the point a non-association is reached. A Talent and Research Stabilisation Fund, targeted to institutions most impacted by non-association, is also under development. In addition, there would be various uplifts to existing schemes across UKRI and the other UK delivery partners, and finally the UK Government will continue to support collaboration with the Horizon Europe programme through Third Country

Participation that gives access to around two-thirds of Horizon Europe calls open to non-associated countries. The UK would provide funding to cover successful applications to Horizon Europe schemes, for grant agreements signed on or before 31 March 2025 (with a decision on longer-term support expected in 2024).

The long-term alternatives programme would focus on four main themes: talent, end-to-end innovation, global collaboration, and the research & development system across England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

Dr Rahemtulla also outlined the proposed future global collaboration activities, which included funding for multilateral and discovery-driven collaborations and an uplift to the International Strategic Partnership Fund (ISPF). It was expected that ISPF, in development by BEIS, would replace previous Official Development Assistance (ODA) and Non-ODA schemes (Newton Fund, Global Challenge Research Fund and the Fund for International Cooperation). BEIS had identified a number of priority themes that ISPF has to deliver, including the Healthy Populations theme, and MRC had been leading on the development of this theme.

Council asked the Head Office to seek clarification whether equivalent funding to the Talent and Research Stabilisation Fund had been put in place for devolved administrations not covered by Research England.

Overall, members supported the outlined approach to Horizon Europe alternatives as pragmatic. Council noted, however, the significant resource and operational expenditure pressures on Head Office, and highlighted the importance of maintaining the flexibility and breadth of the funding available to researchers in the UK that Horizon Europe association would provide.

9. Infections and Immunity Board (IIB) chair

Dr Robin Buckle introduced the preferred candidate, Professor Wendy Barclay, Head of Department of Infectious Disease and the Action Medical Research Chair in Virology at Imperial College London, for the position of Infections and Immunity Board Chair, selected following a highly competitive recruitment process. Professor Barclay would commence in April 2023, taking over from Professor Paul Kaye once his term as chair was complete. Council was pleased to learn that the diversity of the board composition was considered throughout the recruitment process and that EDI considerations were presented to MRC Executive Board when the recommended shortlists were submitted for approval. Members of Council endorsed the recommendation to appoint Professor Barclay as Chair of the Infections and Immunity Board.

10 & 11. EDI and environmental sustainability considerations in decision making

Council then reviewed the decisions made during the meeting for sustainability and EDI considerations, noting that discussion with stakeholders in the Midlands had focussed on inclusion both regarding public and patient involvement and in research careers. EDI parameters were considered throughout the recruitment process for chair of the Infections and Immunity Board, including the advertisement design and shortlisting. Council discussed the sustainability of the new building for the MRC London Institute of Medical Sciences, and noted that there were opportunities for continual improvement in reducing energy consumption, following the progress made elsewhere in MRC estates to reduce energy consumption in existing buildings.

12. Any other business

No other business was raised.

13. Council private business

Following the meeting members held a private business meeting.

Items for Information

Council noted the following papers for information:

14. Updates from the Executive

15. Quarterly Operations Updates: dashboards

16. Research integrity annual report and research reproducibility

17. MRC Midlands Investments – Brief for Council

18. Midlands Innovation Event Programme