



**UK Research
and Innovation**

Professor Dame Ottoline Leyser, DBE FRS
Chief Executive
UK Research and Innovation
Caxton House
Tothill Street
London
SW1H 9NA
ceo@ukri.org

Rt Hon Michelle Donelan MP

Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology

3rd Floor, 100 Parliament Street

London SW1A 2BQ

Sent by email – secretary.state@dsit.gov.uk

30 October 2023

Dear Secretary of State,

Thank you for your letter of 28 October regarding comments made on X by members of Research England's Equality Diversity and Inclusion Advisory Group. I, and all my UKRI colleagues, are shocked by the terrorist acts of Hamas on October 7th and the tragic humanitarian crisis that has unfolded.

I am deeply concerned about the issues you raise in your letter and I am taking swift and robust action accordingly. This action is guided by the principles you articulate, including the Nolan Principles and freedom of speech within the law, and will follow the procedures set out in the advisory group conditions of appointment.

First, I have asked Professor Dame Jessica Corner, Executive Chair of Research England, to suspend operations of the Research England Equality Diversity and Inclusion Advisory Group with immediate effect.

Second, I have launched an investigation into the specific areas of concern that you raise. The UKRI Board will adopt an evidenced, principled approach to take appropriate actions based on the outcomes of the investigation.

Third, Dame Jessica will use the findings to come to a conclusion about the ultimate future of the RE EDI advisory group, and how best to ensure its purpose is fulfilled, advised by the Research England Council.

Fourth, the Board, is already reviewing our advisory structures to ensure that they are fit for purpose. This will include the processes for their establishment and operation.

I have attached the terms of reference for these actions. They address the more detailed points in your letter. I regret that this incident has arisen and want to move swiftly to resolve the relevant issues.

You rightly emphasise the important legal duties set out in the Equality Act 2010 and, in particular, that UKRI as a public funder must comply with the Public Sector Equality Duty to eliminate discrimination, harassment and victimisation, to advance equality of opportunity for those with



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protected characteristics and foster good relations. UKRI takes these duties very seriously. I also welcome your strong focus on eliminating unnecessary bureaucracy, both within UKRI and in the organisations we fund. Our aim is to ensure that those in receipt of our funding meet their responsibilities in the way that best fits their own organisational strategy. This is why UKRI has never mandated the use of any particular EDI charter or process.

Our work on equality, diversity and inclusion aims to connect discovery to business, public services, productivity, growth and jobs by valuing all the people and skills needed for a successful and vibrant research and innovation endeavour, from technicians, archivists and software engineers to disruptive researchers and entrepreneurs.

We are fostering a fully joined up research and innovation system through which people can move freely, building diverse and exciting careers, while simultaneously driving rapid diffusion of ideas, skills and knowhow, delivering on the ambitions of the Science and Technology Framework.

I look forward to continuing to work with you as I lead UKRI as an internationally respected expert, evidence-based, innovative funder.

Best wishes,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Ottoline Leyser', written in a cursive style.

Professor Dame Ottoline Leyser

Chief Executive, UK Research and Innovation



Annex: Terms of Reference

Context

The appointment of members of the Research England (RE) Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) Expert Advisory Group (EAG) was announced on 26 October 2023.

The Secretary of State for the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology (DSIT) wrote to the Chief Executive of UKRI on 28 October, expressing in the strongest terms her concern that one or more individuals appointed to the RE EDI EAG may have breached the terms of their appointment, in relation to their social media activity. The concerns include the 'sharing of some extremist views' on social media and 'expressing sympathy or support for' a proscribed terrorist organisation.

The Secretary of State has also raised concerns about the impartiality of the group overall, and the processes that UKRI follows in making appointments to its advisory groups.

We have given an immediate commitment to investigate these concerns. The operations of the group will be suspended until the conclusion of the investigation.

Conditions applicable to appointments to this group

The Seven Principles of Public Life (The Nolan Principles) (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-7-principles-of-public-life>), which are the foundations of public appointments and provide guidance on the standards expected of public appointees, apply to these appointments. The Terms of Reference (ToR) for the RE EDI EAG specify that the term of office of any member may be terminated, without notice, where the UK Research and Innovation Board believes that their conduct means that they are no longer a suitable member for the RE EDI EAG. All members of the Group confirm acceptance of these ToR on appointment. Members of the group are office holders and not employees of UKRI.

UKRI Response

There are three strands to our immediate response, as follows:

Purpose and scope of the investigation into concerns about individual conduct

We will conduct a transparent and impartial investigation to identify any breach of the terms of appointment to the RE EDI AG. We will consider whether any of the concerns raised require us to seek advice from other organisations. We will seek external advice where we need to do so, for example to clarify matters of law.

This investigation will report to the UKRI Board, in line with the arrangements for decision-making on conduct matters set out in the terms of reference for the RE EDI EAG.

Purpose and scope of the review of the RE EDI EAG

We will examine how the purposes of the RE EDI EAG group can best be fulfilled. This review will be conducted internally and will report to Professor Dame Jessica Corner and the Research England Council.



Board deep dive on the procedures and processes for the establishment and operation of advisory groups

We will consider broader questions about UKRI's procedures and processes for establishing advisory groups, appointing individuals to serve on them, and the requirement and support for members to manage issues of real and perceived impartiality.

The need for such groups is established through our standard governance processes. We have procedures in place including open competition for vacancies, appointment criteria, documentation which sets out our expectations of those appointed, and induction processes.

We will consider whether these processes have worked as intended in this instance, whether further guidance or training can be offered to support those who take up positions on our advisory committees and related bodies, and whether there are lessons learned that can be applied more widely across UKRI. We will consider the balance of our approach to due diligence.

Timing, oversight and reporting

This programme of work will be conducted as quickly as reasonably possible. The overall programme will be overseen by members of the UKRI Board, and the findings will be reported to the Secretary of State for DSIT.

Further details on timing and other matters may be communicated when more details of the programme have been confirmed.