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## Minutes of the Council Business meeting held on 4 October 2023

<b>Attendees</b>		
<b>MRC Council</b>	<b>Executive Board</b>	<b>Presenters/Guests</b>
Patrick Chinnery	Rob Buckle	Gavin Mapstone (Items 5 & 6)
Richard Murley	Hugh Dunlop	Erika Doyle (Item 8)
Kim Graham	Claire Newland	Rachel Knowles (Item 8)
Roger Highfield	Jonathan Pearce	Anya Bek (Item 10)
Simon Hollingsworth	Susan Simon	Stacy-Ann Ashley (Item 11)
Jill Pell		
Munir Pirmohamed	<b>Observers</b>	<b>Secretariat</b>
Andy Richards	Helen Bodmer	Simone Bryan
Irene Tracy	Heather Coupar (Item 8)	Kathryn Jackson
Graham Spittle	Mary Derrick	

### 1. Council private business

Before the Council business meeting, members held a private business meeting.

### 2. Welcome and Apologies

The Council Business meeting on 4 October 2023 was held at the University of Glasgow, following a series of engagement meetings with stakeholders from across the Scottish region.

The business meeting was chaired by MRC's Executive Chair, Professor Patrick Chinnery. Apologies were received from Drs Lucy Chappell and Precious Lunga, and Professor Eleanor Riley.

Mr Richard Murley, Professor Munir Pirmohamed, and Drs Andy Richards and Susan Simon joined the meeting virtually.

### 3. Register of declared interests

Professor Chinnery asked members to declare any new interests and send updated declarations to the secretariat.

#### **4. Minutes of the Council Business meeting on 12 July and joint Council and Strategy Board meeting on 13 July 2023**

The minutes were confirmed as accurate records of the meetings.

#### **5 & 6. Finance report and Rapid Spend**

MRC Finance Director, Mr Gavin Mapstone, provided Council with an update on the overall financial position, the 2023/24 extramural commitment budget and allocation, and 2023/24 risks and opportunities.

UKRI had forecasted overspend against its budget, in line with normal practice and an expectation that underspends would arise in-year. At present Councils were being asked to ensure they submit robust forecasts but were not being asked to reduce core-research activity to mitigate the overspend. If the overspend did not naturally reduce there would be a requirement for Councils to identify savings. Core Research reported a £10.3m underspend, consistent with the finance teams refresh of forecasts during August that suggested there was up to £15m of headroom remaining within this year's core research allocation that can be redeployed to support strategic priorities or reduce pressures in future years. At the departmental level there remained a high likelihood that DSIT would not utilise all the budget held for Horizon Europe within 2023/24. UKRI had submitted options for rapid spend but these are competing with other departmental and ministerial priorities. The most likely scenario for additional funding at this stage would be an increase to capital allocation to support additional equipment awards, however, it was good practice to have a range of options available that enabled MRC to utilise any underspends that arise in-year, either within its own allocations or elsewhere within UKRI/government.

Council welcomed the update and noted the risks and opportunities outlined. It was acknowledged that overall, MRC remained well placed to deliver to allocation on its core-research allocations, and that full year forecasts provided to UKRI/DSIT were currently to budget. Questions were raised as to whether MRC or UKRI had a strategy for engaging with the Horizon Europe programme, given the importance of demonstrating to UK government the value of the UK's association. It was confirmed that an update would be provided at the next Council meeting. Members commented that it would be useful for future discussions to understand the potential scale of the impact of each of the rapid spend options to help guide decision making.

Professor Chinnery noted that this Council meeting was the last meeting for Mr Mapstone, MRC Finance Director, and thanked Mr Mapstone for his service to MRC and UKRI.

#### **7. Science Commitment Budget**

Dr Rob Buckle, MRC's Chief Science Officer, introduced this item and provided Council with preliminary information on the 2024/25 science commitment budget planning. The commitment budget represented MRC's 'business as usual' funding distributed through established regular repeating funding opportunities and MRC-led strategic funding opportunities. In this first commitment planning discussion, Council considered at a high-level how to distribute the available commitment budget and how to balance investment across areas, with the final commitment budget figure being confirmed after the next finance quarterly planning and forecast refresh.

In addition to the commitment budget, investments would be made in 2024/25 into two new MRC Centres of Research Excellence (CoRE), at the same time the current unit portfolio would be transitioned to the MRC CoRE model, with a creation 'transition budget' allocated to

research boards in 2024/25 to support the transition of MRC units to other funding arrangements, with a subsequent anticipated increase in grant applications to research boards.

As the end of the spending review period approached, there was uncertainty about the timing of future reviews and the direction of future settlements. Council was invited to confirm its risk appetite for setting the forward budget, noting the volatility of the current economic environment.

Council welcomed the update and raised questions about leverage and additional support routes, that MRC was able to access, outside of its core funding allocation. It was confirmed that around two thirds of MRC's funding was from core allocation and the remaining was through access to UKRI funds, such as the Health Ageing and Wellbeing and Tackling Infections programmes. MRC also leveraged funding through charity and industry partnerships. Strategy Board's budget had been used to seed or launch new areas with MRC funds, which had then been further leveraged by UKRI funds, and had been a useful way to demonstrate commitment to priority areas when approaching a Spending Review. Members commented that it would be useful to set budget planning within this context and the context of MRC's vision, so that the budget could be used as a lever to drive MRC's ambitions, and that overall, there should be a long-term approach to budget planning that was aligned to MRC's strategic vision.

Members recognised the difficulty in agreeing budget priorities due to the number of uncertainties. However, it was agreed that training should be a priority given the challenges in attracting and retaining early careers researchers, especially clinical academics. In addition, having a clear strategy for engaging with the Horizon Europe programme would be important for supporting the talent pipeline. A balance of investment between prioritisation of training and better maintaining research board budgets should be sought.

It was agreed that commitment budget options, including more detail on additional support routes and MRC's longer-term ambitions, would be brought to the next Council meeting as part of Council's discussion on the commitment budget planning.

## **8. Developing the MRC Vision and Priorities for Public Partnerships**

Erika Doyle, MRC Senior Partnership Communications Manager and Dr Rachel Knowles, MRC Lead for Clinical Research, updated Council on MRC's developing vision and priorities for public partnerships, and plan for wider consultation. With oversight and input from the MRC Public Engagement Oversight Group, and following a competitive tender process, Vocal had been appointed to facilitate the co-development process with public partners and specialist practitioners. Vocal had worked with an external advisory group to facilitate a series of stakeholder workshops with public contributors, researchers, MRC staff, public involvement and engagement specialists and partner organisations to explore what people would like to see in the MRC public involvement and engagement vision and priorities, and what would be needed to support their delivery in practice. Priorities identified during the co-development workshops and the subsequent proposed actions for MRC were presented to Council.

Council welcomed the update. The challenges in successfully engaging the public in discovery science were acknowledged, and Council emphasised the need for a package of support for members of the public, such as provision of training, so that they had the skills and understanding to contribute meaningfully to engagement activities. Members commented it would be important to identify areas of best practice such as the patient and public engagement being delivered by charity and other funders. Seeking a better understanding of patient and public needs and desired outcomes would help in prioritising actions, and it was agreed that the public consultation on MRC's strategy would facilitate this understanding. It

was highlighted that the Campaign for Science and Engineering had surveyed public attitudes towards R&D and had published reports on existing awareness and knowledge of R&D, and how to engage different public audiences, and that this work might be helpful in informing and shaping MRC's approach.

Council agreed with the proposal that MRC should create a new Advisory Group of public partners and public involvement and engagement professionals to guide MRC head office. They also agreed with the proposal to progress the co-development of a draft public involvement and engagement strategy for wider consultation. The final strategy will be brought back to Council at its meeting in March 2024.

### **9. Board Chair Recruitment**

Dr Buckle updated Council that MRC was seeking to appoint two new Research Board Chairs, to commence 1 April 2024, to replace Professor Paul Matthews, current Chair of the Neurosciences and Mental Health Board (NMHB) and Professor Brian Walker, current Chair of the Population and Systems Medicine Board (PSMB). Following interviews, offers of appointment had been made to Professor Louise Kenny, University of Liverpool for PSMB, and Professor Marcus Munafò, University of Bristol for NMHB.

Council noted the high quality of candidates and approved the appointments.

It was noted that Professors Patrick Chinnery, Jill Pell and Eleanor Riley sat on the interviewing panels and that recommended appointments are to individuals based at University of Liverpool and University of Bristol, where council members Professors Munir Pirmohamed and John Iredale are based, respectively. These were not seen as material conflicts.

### **10. Biannual Risk Review**

Anya Bek, MRC senior risk and assurance business partner provided Council with the bi-annual update on MRC's Corporate Risk Register. Reviews had taken place of the MRC risk register by MRC's Executive Board and risk definitions, scores, controls and action plans had been reviewed in detail. The risk profile had remained stable with the following notable changes to the register since the last update - management of MRC owned Intellectual Property and National Power Outage.

Council noted the update and raised questions about the changes. It was confirmed that a national power outage of seven days or more, could impact upon the continued operations of MRC sites, which could include impact on research or clinical trials, animal facilities and continued operation of site. MRC was undertaking studies to research alternative power solutions such as ground source heat pumps, wind, solar and biofuels. These alternatives required planning permission and so were not straightforward to implement.

It was confirmed that the new risk on the register reflected effective management of IP, and that this had been separated from the risk associated with managing relationships with the charity and industry sectors.

### **11. MRC Communications Strategy Update**

Stacy-Ann Ashley, MRC Communications Business Partner, updated Council on the process and development of the MRC communications and engagement (C&E) plan. The MRC C&E

plan supported the MRC Strategic Delivery Plan and sat alongside the UKRI communications and engagement strategic framework - which supported the UKRI Strategy. In March, Council approved the 'strategic purpose', 'strategic approach, 'communications and engagement 'objectives', and the next steps for the MRC C&E plan 2023-25. Following Council's meeting in March the 'strategic purpose' had been refined to be more people focused, key messages had been drafted and proposed key audiences identified. During this time, UKRI had also published the organisation's core messages framework, which had been used to align and develop the MRC key messages.

Council welcomed the update and asked questions about the key audiences, and whether the public was included. It was confirmed that business as usual activities, such as communication with the public would still be ongoing, and that MRC and UKRI would continue to communicate and engage with a wider audience, but given the forthcoming Spending Review the focus would be to communicate with key stakeholders such as the UK government, other funders and business. Members highlighted the importance of engagement with stakeholders across the life sciences and industry sectors and suggested a number of stakeholders with which to engage such as, Office for Life Sciences, IT companies, Devolved Administrations and NICE. To engage effectively with Government, language used, key headline messages and infographics, would be important, as well as ensuring messaging was aligned with Government priorities. In addition, members highlighted how nuanced engagement with different stakeholders was important. Understanding the different opportunities and needs of UKRI's many stakeholders would be critical for successful engagement and again, ensuring messages resonated with stakeholder priorities.

It was confirmed that there was still some work to do to convey one narrative across all UKRI's funding activities relevant to human health and to ensure that the framing and narrative was consistent to avoid confusion. Council expressed disappointment that there was little visibility of MRC funding in communications or announcements and commented that it was important for MRC researchers to highlight that their work had been supported by MRC funding, and when announcements were made, to make Council contributions clear. Members highlighted the importance of a strategy for working with researchers to ensure that MRC funding was acknowledged and appropriately branded. This was particularly important as UKRI built into its campaign for the next comprehensive spending review. Council members acknowledged their advocacy role for MRC and UKRI and encouraged MRC to consider how it could make the best use of members' extensive networks as a channel to support MRC's communications. It was confirmed that MRC's Communications Business Partner was working with MRC staff to develop an information pack which highlighted the impact of MRC's investments, and which could be used by members for this purpose.

## **12. Equality, Diversity and Inclusion and Environmental Sustainability considerations**

Council reviewed the decisions made during the meeting for EDI considerations and environmental considerations, noting that EDI considerations were implicit for the discussion on developing the MRC vision for priorities for public partnerships and the board chair appointments, and that due consideration should be given to both EDI and environmental sustainability impacts within the science commitment budget planning.

## **13. Any other business**

Under Any Other Business it was announced that Professor Nick Wareham had been appointed Director of the Population Health Improvement Network.

Council commented on the success of the regional stakeholder engagement meeting and decided that Wales would be the location of their 2024 regional meeting, given a Council meeting had not been held there since 2011.

*Items for Information*

Council noted the following papers for information:

- 14. Updates from the Executive**
- 15. Quarterly Operations Updates: dashboards**
- 16. Research integrity and research reproducibility annual report**
- 17. MRC investments in Scotland**
- 18. MRC Regional Meeting Scotland 2023 Event Programme**
- 19. SULSA Information Pack – including case studies for roundtable discussions**