

# MEDICAL RESEARCH COUNCIL



Medical  
Research  
Council

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## Minutes of the MRC Council Business Meeting, March 2025

**Date:** Thursday 13 March 2025

**Location:** Council Chamber, Academy of Medical Sciences

**Time:** 10:00 – 13:50

Council Members	
Professor Patrick Chinnery (MRC Executive Chair)	Dr Precious Lunga
Ms Kay Boycott (SIM)	Professor Jill Pell
Professor Lucy Chappell	Professor Sir Munir Pirmohamed
Professor Kim Graham	Dr Andy Richards
Dr Roger Highfield	Professor Eleanor Riley
Professor Simon Hollingsworth	Dr Graham Spittle

Attendees	
Dr Louise Jones - MRC Director of Investigator Led Themes	Professor Dame Nancy Rothwell – Observing
Mr Alastair Lamb - MRC Chief of Staff	Dr Rebecca Aarons - MRC Strategy and Planning Manager – observing items 7 & 8
Ms Helen Morgan - EPSRC & MRC Finance Director, acting MRC Chief Operating Officer	Dr Rebecca Barlow - MRC Head of Strategy and Planning – observing items 7 & 8
Dr Claire Newland - MRC Director of Policy, Ethics & Governance	Dr Heike Weber - MRC Associate Director Strategy & Planning – observing items 7 & 8
Dr Glenn Wells - MRC Deputy Executive Chair	Ms Alice Summers - UKRI Head of Risk & Assurance – item 9
Dr Ceri Williams - MRC Director of Challenge Led Themes	Professor Emily Williams – Science Speaker from KCL

Secretariat	
Simone Bryan (MRC Secretariat)	Ms Kathryn Jackson (MRC Secretariat)

## **1. Council Private Business**

- 1.1. Before the start of the meeting, Council held a private business meeting.

## **2. Welcome and Introductions**

- 2.1 Ms Kay Boycott, Senior Independent Member of Council chaired the meeting. Ms Boycott welcomed all members and Professor Dame Nancy Rothwell to the meeting. Professor Rothwell attended the meeting in an observer capacity, ahead of her appointment to Council from 1 April 2025. Professor Lucy Chappell joined the meeting for items 8 and 10.
- 2.3 Members were reminded of attendance expectations: as part of their T&Cs, members are expected to attend all council meetings. Meetings are in person and remote attendance is only expected in exceptional circumstances.
- 2.4. Council was reminded that their annual self-assessment exercise was soon to commence. Members would be asked to complete a short questionnaire and individual meetings with MRC's Executive Chair and Council's Senior Independent Member had been arranged.

## **3. Register of Declared Interests**

- 3.1. Members were reminded that the 2025 Declarations of Interests collections exercise is underway. Members were asked to contact the MRC with any questions or if they require support.
- 3.2. Professor Precious Lunga declared a new role as Senior Advisor at the Ellison Institute of Technology.

## **4. Minutes of Council Business meeting and joint Science Strategy Board / Council meeting December 2024**

- 4.1 Council approved the minutes of the Council Business meeting and the joint Science Strategy Board / Council meeting held on 12 December 2024.
- 4.2. An update was given on actions arising from the last meeting.

## **5. Updates from the Executive**

- 5.1. Simone Bryan, MRC Head of Programme Policy and Governance, asked members to note the updates on recent activities, decisions, and major issues that the Executive had been addressing and asked for questions.
- 5.2. Members noted the announcement of the first two MRC Centres of Excellence and highlighted that as MRC Centres of Research Excellence are multi-institutional, the range of institutions and their geographical spread should be included within future communications to demonstrate how MRC is investing in research excellence across the UK. Communications on future announcements should also highlight any successful MRC unit applications.

- 5.3. Questions were raised about the benefits of the reclassification of the UK Dementia Research Institute as a private sector body and the details of the data access bill.

**ACTION:** MRC Director of Policy, Ethics and Governance to provide information to council member Andy Richards to answer the question on the Data Access Bill.

## 6. Finance Report and Science Commitment Budget

- 6.1. Ms Helen Morgan, MRC and EPSRC Finance Director, presented information on forecasted financial outturn for 24/25 and graphics depicting portfolio split by spend and headroom for future years. Council then discussed the types of financial information members needed to execute its role in advising the Executive Chair on the correct balance of the MRC portfolio.
- 6.2. Members welcomed the presentation and commented that there was a perception that there had been little change to MRC's portfolio over the longer term. The block graphic depicting MRC's portfolio by spend was very useful. It was recommended that the graphic be adapted to include, or supplemented with:
- A strategic overlay so it is clear whether spend is being used as a lever to drive MRC's ambitions, and that changes in the balance of the portfolio are aligned to MRC's strategic vision.
  - Progress towards the desired change and variance against target
  - What flexibility there is to realise change in the portfolio and decision points.
  - Data on leverage and co-funding outside of MRC's core funding allocation and access to UKRI funds
  - A clear articulation of MRC's risk profile
- 6.3. Council noted that although material headroom would not be available until 2027/28, planning would need to start now. It would be important to clearly articulate a timeline of key decisions points on financial matters so that it is clear when advice is sought from Council to feed into key decisions made by the Senior Executive Team, and that this should be clearly articulated in Council's forward plan.
- 6.4. The detailed finance report and detail on how MRC's commitment budget was allocated could be included for information purposes only. Members also commented that it would be important to present a consistent set of information regularly so that progress against desired change could be measured easily.

**ACTION:** A draft finance report would be developed based on Council's recommendations, with further input from a subset of Council members and presented for further discussion at the Council meeting in July.

## 7. Plans for Partnering (leverage and spend)

- 7.1. Dr Glenn Wells, MRC Deputy Executive Chair, presented Council with current data on co-funding income from a broad range of external partners, charities and government departments across the UK, and income from across constituent parts of UKRI and pan UKRI funds. The landscape is complex, with many interdependencies, and partnering with such a breadth of partners, nationally and internationally, posed some challenges for MRC, however the potential benefits are great. In addition to financial leverage, working in partnership brings a wealth of benefits from access to patient and public groups, greater visibility of UKRI funding activities, access to knowledge and expertise, resource sharing, and vital contributions to policy shaping and priority setting. The importance of UKRI working closely with government departments to facilitate the delivery of the government's R&D missions was highlighted and the MRC / NIHR relationship was one route through which to achieve this.

- 7.2. Council welcomed the update and noted the work MRC's strategic engagement team were doing to embed improved ways of working with medical research charities. Members commented that compared to the breadth of MRC's partnership activity, proportionately the scale of leverage was very small. Given the complex landscape and the considerable amount of resource needed to invest into making partnership working successful, members recommended that a much more targeted approach was needed and that a key strategic goal for MRC should be to increase the amount of co-funding income received through partnerships.
- 7.3. Members recommended that a framework for partnering be developed which includes the extent to which the partnership aligns with MRC priorities and strategic direction, the desired scale of co-funding, the likelihood of investment and confidence in delivery including an assessment of the financial risks.
- 7.4. Members also suggested the following:
- Partners should be regularly involved in the co-creation and co-design of calls and strategic initiatives.
  - Where aligned to priorities and strategic direction, MRC should partner with the relevant international charities and charitable foundations.
  - MRC should undertake work to better understand its capacity and capability to gain the depth of understanding of potential partner organisations and foster the strong relationships needed for successful partnering, so that a more targeted approach can be taken.
  - Better articulation of the unique leverage that MRC can bring to a partnership, for example access to the clinical research base, the innovation base, academic research, NHS, data or relationships with industry and SMEs.

**ACTION:** An update to be given at a future Council meeting.

## **8. Update on Spending Review and MRC Strategic Delivery Plan**

- 8.1. Dr Wells provided Council with an update on the outcomes of Phase 1 of the Spending Review, ongoing work on Phase 2, and the planned refresh of the MRC Strategic Delivery Plan (SDP) 2025-27. Publication of the refreshed SDP is expected in October 2025, and there will be an opportunity for Council to provide comments and input at its meeting in July. The refreshed SDP will be a 'bridging document' taking MRC from the current SDP through to 2027 when a more comprehensive strategic refresh will be undertaken.
- 8.2. Members noted the update on the SDP refresh and asked questions about the approach MRC is taking to strategic planning for possible outcomes of the Spending Review phase 2 and headroom choices. It was confirmed that although the Spending Review phase 2 allocation to DSIT will be announced in the summer, MRC's allocation will not be confirmed for some time after that. MRC's executive team had been making decisions on options for reducing spend in 2025/26 and had already commenced planning on key deliverables for beyond 25/26.
- 8.3. Questions were asked about how MRC is planning for potential system wide challenges such as changes in delivery partners, for example financial pressures faced by the higher education sector. It was confirmed that MRC and UKRI is aware of the challenges faced by other parts of the sector; MRC had removed the stipulation for matched funding from HEIs as a requirement of funding calls and was working to ensure that its current funding model is compatible with future change.
- 8.4. Members commented that it would be useful to understand the following:
- Detailed scenario planning and headroom in the context of the longer-term spending review settlement linked to MRC's risk appetite.

- The role MRC plays in the delivery of each of UKRI's priority outcomes and in the underpinning investments in people, infrastructure, and technologies. This will be set out in the refreshed Strategic Delivery Plan.
- Plans for adapting to changes in delivery partners.

**ACTION:** A strategic forward look discussion item, addressing these points, to be brought to a future Council meeting.

## 9. Risk Update February 2025

- 9.1. Alastair Lamb, MRC Chief of Staff and Alice Summers, UKRI Head of Risk provided Council with an overview of objective focused risks in the context of developing a refreshed approach to MRC top level risks.
- 9.2. Council noted the update and asked questions about how the approach was developed. It was acknowledged that this was a new approach that will need refinement. In this context members commented:
- some rationalisation could be carried out which would reduce the number of top level risks
  - reputational risks should be included
  - language used to describe risks needs to explicitly include 'impact' and to ensure this included impact relating to innovation
  - it wasn't clear whether international horizon-scanning with respect to disruptive technologies was included within any of the risks.
  - The approach needs to include a clear articulation of MRC's risk appetite.
- 9.3. Members noted the approach was objective centric and that it presented an aggregated view of risk, which was not possible by looking at individual risks on their own. However, members commented it would be useful to understand how the underpinning risks mapped onto the 9-box model to provide assurances on the utility of the new approach.
- 9.4. Members recommended that the language used to describe risks could be framed more positively and it was suggested that terminology used in the 'common cause analysis' might be adopted where relevant.
- 9.5. It was suggested that the refresh of MRC's Strategic Delivery Plan might present an opportunity to articulate the mitigations that will address these top-level risks.

## 10. Council Forward Look

- 10.1. Simone Bryan, MRC Head of Programme Policy and Governance, presented the 2025/26 forward plan for MRC Council business and suggested plans for incorporating stakeholder engagement within meetings of Council.
- 10.2. Members agreed it would be useful to incorporate stakeholder engagement into one or two Council meetings a year with the purpose of discussing areas of shared interest. Members recommended that engagement should focus on external stakeholders and that these sessions should be used for framing planned strategic discussion items.
- 10.3. Suggestions for topics for discussion at future meetings included: MRC's industrial strategy, challenges faced by the Higher Education sector, support for critical skills to keep pace with technological advances, responding to changes in government priorities and agile portfolio analysis, and management and join-up of UK data assets.

**ACTION:** The secretariat to schedule future discussion topics where aligned to MRC strategy and key areas the Executive intends to seek Council's expert input and advice on across 2025/26.

## **11. Science Talk**

- 11.1 Following the meeting, members received a talk from Professor Emily Williams, Professor of Diversity, Development and Inclusion and Vice Dean (People & Culture) at Kings College London, on her work on research culture within the new MRC/BHF Centre of Research Excellence in Advanced Cardiac Therapies.

### ***Items for Information***

Council noted the following papers for information:

## **12. Update on provision of Macaques to UK research**

## **13. Diversity across MRC Boards and Panels**

- 13.1. Members noted the update and raised the need to include lower socio-economic background and white minority ethnic within the category of under-represented groups.

## **14. AOB**

Under any other business members were reminded of the date and location of the next Council meeting.

Meeting End