

# MEDICAL RESEARCH COUNCIL



03

Author: Simone Bryan

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**Minutes of the Council meeting held at One Kemble Street on 7 May 2019**

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**Present:**

<b>Council</b>	<b>Head Office staff</b>
Professor Fiona Watt (Executive Chair)	Dr Rob Buckle
Dr John Brown	Mr Hugh Dunlop
Dr Roger Highfield	Dr Louise Leong
Professor John Iredale	Dr Declan Mulkeen
Mr Richard Murley	Dr Frances Rawle
Dr Mene Pangalos	Ms Susan Simon
Professor Jill Pell	Ms Simone Bryan
Professor Sir Munir Pirmohamed	Dr Katy Ingleby
Professor Eleanor Riley	Dr Heike Weber
Dr Graham Spittle	Professor Patrick Chinnery
Professor Charlotte Watts	Mrs Lauren Merritt
Dr Pauline Williams	Mrs Stacey Parncutt
Dr Louise Wood	
	<b>Guests</b>
	Dr Ian Viney (item 5)
	Ms Pauline Mullin (item 9)
	Ms Katrina Nevin-Ridley (item 10)
	Dr Jonathan Pearce (item 6)
	Dr Mark Pitman (item 13)
<b>Apologies</b>	
Professor Irene Tracey	

**1. Welcome and introductions**

Professor Fiona Watt welcomed everyone to the meeting and introduced Mrs Lauren Merritt and Mrs Stacey Parncutt who would be supporting the Council secretariat.

Apologies had been received from Professor Irene Tracey, and it was noted that Professor Charlotte Watts would be arriving late to the meeting at 15.30. Professor Eleanor Riley and Dr John Brown left the meeting after item 13. Dr Graham Spittle joined the meeting via teleconference.

**2. Register of declared interests**

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Professor Watt thanked members for completing the annual update to their declarations of interest and asked those members who had not already done so to return their updated declarations to the secretariat.

### **3. Minutes of the Council meeting held on 7 March 2019**

The minutes of the Council business meeting were approved as an accurate record.

#### **3a Matters Arising**

#### **3b. The MRC Internal Remuneration Committee**

Mr Hugh Dunlop presented Council with proposed terms of reference and membership for the MRC Internal Remuneration Committee. UKRI Councils have been allowed to retain flexibilities on pay for senior staff in Institutes. For the MRC this covers employees in MRC Harwell, the MRC Laboratory of Molecular Biology, London Institute of Medical Sciences and the National Centre for Replacement, Refinement and Reduction of Animals in Research. Senior pay and appointments above £100,000 were previously considered by the MRC Remuneration Committee, but this ceased to exist when UKRI formed in April 2018. The UKRI Nominations and Remuneration Committee has agreed that pay and appointments of senior employees in the Institutes should be delegated to local Council Remuneration Committees. Council agreed the membership and Terms of Reference of the committee, but the chair was to be decided.

### **4. Finance Report**

Mr Dunlop presented Council with an update on the provisional finance outturn for 2018/19, which highlighted the core programme resource expenditure was 0.03 per cent lower than forecasted and 1.2 per cent higher than budget. Main movements from the forecast included higher University Unit funding largely due to quinquennial review related restructuring costs, change of overseas units' payment profiles and surrender of the Elsie Widdowson Labs (EWL) lease following closure. Capital expenditure was 4.3 per cent higher than forecast. Main movements included HMRC retracting the demand to repay zero-rated VAT on the construction of the LMB building as a result of the loss of charitable status, and UKRI making the funding available for the endowment for the Francis Crick Institute, following approval of the business case by BEIS. Administration expenditure was £1.3m (7.9 per cent) lower than forecast and £1.4m (8.7 per cent) lower than budget. This was due to a number of small variances related to staff costs and the timing of spend on IT project costs, travel and subsistence, training, legal and professional, and software costs.

Rebecca Endean highlighted the importance of Council identifying opportunities for rapid spend to help UKRI avoid underspends.

### **5. Strategic Evaluation Long Term Cycle**

Professor Watt welcomed Dr Ian Viney, Director of MRC Strategic Evaluation and Impact, to the meeting. Dr Viney presented Council with the current programme and plans for the MRC evaluation and analysis programme. The main areas of current work included research management information and statistics, testing new methods/datasets, and formal evaluations of MRC programmes. Various areas where the MRC could benefit most from new analytical evidence, insight and formal evaluation were suggested, including analysis of the peer review process, and digital health landscape analysis. Three broad aims were proposed: developing a better understanding of the MRC's research and the global research context, improving MRC/UKRI evaluative capability, and working with other partners and membership of steering groups.

Members discussed the need to have ways of assessing UKRI's and MRC's position in health research and innovation in an increasingly multidisciplinary and international landscape. Members

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also highlighted the challenge of getting useful success measures and external comparators and benchmarks for MRC's research and training programmes. In line with UKRI's strong focus on talent and skills development and mobility, new ways of tracking the MRC's investment in people would be important. A number of issues for further consideration were highlighted, including whether comparisons could be made across research boards, whether health economic approaches could be applied to evaluate investments, and how real time progress of programmes is evaluated, particularly with regards to milestone driven awards.

Questions were asked as to whether the MRC could adopt approaches from other constituent councils of UKRI. Rebecca Endean confirmed there is now a single data hub, which should facilitate UKRI-wide analysis and international benchmarking. The importance of ambitious, in depth evaluation projects that require both expertise and new / improved analytical tools, and generate new understanding of research quality, progress and impact, was highlighted. Members suggested focusing on evaluations relevant to industry and economic growth, and agreed there should be further discussion of areas for prioritisation and defining success measures, following discussion of the MRC's 10-year review of its translational research programmes at the joint Council and Strategy Board meeting in July.

### **6. Council forward look including performance indicators and regular reports**

Simone Bryan introduced this item. In addition to the series of regular reports Council sees as part of its yearly workplan, Council was presented with a proposal for two key reports members should regularly receive to monitor how well the MRC is performing, and to inform decisions on the allocation of the budget: 1). A quarterly performance dashboard that would provide information on business-critical activities, application rates, capacity and capability data, top level risk, finance and HR information; and 2). An annual report that features a series of research-based statistics such as demand and success data (including equality and diversity monitoring information), publications and citation data, and information on trends in outputs, outcome and impact of MRC funded research.

Professor Watt asked Mr Richard Murley to lead the discussion. Mr Murley commented on the need for benchmarks/comparators when presenting data, and/or presenting data as trends over time, in order to set data within a meaningful context and narrative. Members raised the importance of regular reports presenting real time process indicators to inform decisions on budget allocation, and output, outcome and impact indicators to inform the dynamic and responsive development of strategy. The development of a quarterly dashboard was agreed. In addition to the need for long-term trend data and better external comparators, members suggested a number of metrics that would be useful, including: geographical spread of research, communications and engagement activities; equality, diversity and inclusion statistics; and business critical activities, as well as shorter-term management information on urgent issues – such as a rapid response to a global epidemic. Dr Louise Wood commented that, in addition to these reports, it would be useful to regularly review the MRC's positioning within, and synergy with, other constituent parts of UKRI.

It was anticipated that regular reports and key performance indicators are likely to develop and evolve over time to reflect changes in the funding and policy landscape. Members agreed a draft dashboard would be presented for further comment at the joint Council and Strategy Board meeting in July.

### **7. Council Objectives**

Dr Frances Rawle introduced this item, setting out proposed Council objectives for 2019/20, which were drafted based on the key responsibilities of Council discussed at the last meeting and the forward look and annual business plan (item 6) at this meeting. Dr Rawle explained some objectives were likely to be similar from year to year and some were specific to the upcoming year. The objectives would influence the planning of Council agendas.

Questions were raised as to overlap with objectives for Strategy Board and Dr Heike Weber clarified that there are a few areas of overlap with Strategy Board, which comprised topics that will be discussed at the planned joint meetings between Council and Strategy Board. Questions were raised as to whether objectives covering the MRC's reputation and influence, role in public engagement and positioning within UKRI should be included. Members commented that the number of objectives was too high and suggested it would be useful to focus objectives on a number of key activities Council will deliver, specific to the upcoming year, leaving business as usual activities on the rolling programme.

A revised list of 2019/20 Council objectives, focusing on a small number of key tasks specific to the upcoming year, would be prepared for further discussion at the July Council meeting.

## **8. The MRC's input into the Comprehensive Spending Review**

Dr Declan Mulkeen introduced this item, which set out UKRI's preparations for the 2019 spending review and began with an overview of the major strategic changes in its investments that MRC had made over the last 15 years.

The timing and time period for the Spending Review were not clear but it was possible that the 2019 CSR might be later than originally planned and that budgets might only be agreed up to 2020/21, with a longer-term plan being developed in 2020. Nevertheless, it would be important to build the strongest possible case to Government for two scenarios; flat funding in real terms, and 2.4 per cent growth, with the most attractive, exciting and visionary examples.

Council discussed the main areas of growth the MRC should prioritise, opportunities for new infrastructure emerging from the UKRI Infrastructure Roadmap, and options for the MRC's top five high-profile, attractive investments.

The importance of language used in capturing the attention of government was highlighted. Members discussed possible new centres of excellence with industry engagement, underpinned by key technologies and methodologies such as AI, machine learning and bioinformatics. Areas where the MRC could demonstrate leadership and support strength in places across the UK should be prioritised.

Questions were asked about UKRI's input into the Augar review and the potential impact on funding for research. Rebecca Endean explained Britain's exit from the EU, and potentially outcomes from the Augar review, could make it harder to achieve growth in public sector research and development. Members raised concerns over the sustainability of university research in the context of full economic costing and alternatives to European funding.

## **9. Annual MRC communications update**

Professor Watt welcomed Pauline Mullin, Head of MRC Communications and Public Engagement, to the meeting. Ms Mullin introduced this item, which presented Council with an update on delivery against the communications objectives set out in the MRC Communication and Engagement Strategy 2014-2019, during calendar year 2018. Ms Mullin summarised highlights from 2018, which included an overall increase in traffic to the MRC's channels: the news section of the website was up 133 per cent, the MRC's blog, *MRC Insight*, up 115 per cent to 94,000 views and the MRC's Twitter following is 51,031 (from 41,756 in 2017). The annual MRC Festival of Medical Research continued to be a very effective catalyst for motivating researchers to undertake public engagement. It was also a significant driver for training and capacity building in public engagement. Sixty-six per cent of MRC Festival activity organisers reported that by taking part their colleagues and students had a better understanding of MRC strategic aims and 97 per cent reported that their audiences had increased their awareness and understanding of the benefits of medical research.

Partnership activities such as the 2018 annual press officer conference were highlighted, as was the significant extension in reach and diversity of the MRC's public engagement audience, including a more geographically and demographically diverse school audience through the use of online opportunities, such as the MRC's citizen science programme. Questions were asked about the branding of UKRI and the MRC's media stories, the demographic of traffic to MRC channels, and how impact of public engagement and communication activities is measured. Visitors to the MRC website were mainly from the UK, Europe and USA, and a survey carried out in 2018 demonstrated about a third of traffic to MRC channels were researchers, a third were related professions such as healthcare professionals, and a third were members of the public. Ms Mullin explained that there were few robust mechanisms for assessing the impact of communications and engagement activities and the central UKRI communications and engagement team would be developing new ways to carry out better evaluation of impact.

## **10. External relations, communications and public engagement update**

Professor Watt welcomed Katrina Nevin-Ridley, the UKRI Director of External Relations, Communications and Public Engagement to the meeting. Ms Nevin-Ridley updated Council on the new centralised UKRI structure for external relations, communications and public engagement, setting out the reasons for change, which included ensuring UKRI has a distinct, consistent and powerful voice, and developing improved ways of working to deliver communications with greater impact. A single communications and engagement team would have dedicated, flexible resource for planning and evaluation, content development and joining-up activities on internal and external communications.

The new operating model would build on constituent council strengths and it was envisioned that organising activities together under a central function would bring together a wider set of expertise and increased resource for industrial strategy challenge funds and cross-cutting themes. Each constituent council had a number of ongoing activities and as part of the reorganisation best practice would be shared and ongoing activities would be reviewed and prioritised. Ms Nevin-Ridley set out the different functions of the centralised team and explained the structure of the new operating model, which would be in place by June. Priorities for the team included evolving the UKRI brand, developing a single UKRI website, a new internal communications platform and launching a new public engagement strategy.

Council raised concerns about protection of the MRC brand and how dilution of the brand might impact on the MRC's influence and its stakeholder engagement. Members commented that any dilution of the MRC brand could carry some reputational risk and lead to ineffectiveness in community-specific engagement. Questions were asked about the current capacity within the MRC communications and engagement team, and planned capacity within the centralised structure. Ms Nevin-Ridley explained there would be one business partner who would be the key relationship holder for the MRC and up to two other constituent councils of UKRI. Members emphasised the critical need for MRC specific resource at sufficient capacity to protect the MRC brand, maintain effective stakeholder and community specific engagement, and to mitigate the risks identified.

## **11. Quartz Transformation update**

The Executive Chair updated Council on the outcome of the Quartz transformation programme in relation to the overall MRC head office structure and set out her objectives for 2019. The principles for the reorganisation of the MRC head office structure were as follows: the structure would reflect funding streams more clearly; seniority would no longer be tied to number of direct reports; there would be greater opportunities for career progression and training; and there would be a flattening of reporting layers and optimisation of the number of direct reports.

Professor Watt explained that her objectives for 2019. She also intended to implement a rolling programme of visits with key companies to strengthen the MRC's relationships with the commercial sector. Reviews of the MRC's Units and Centres portfolio and the QQR process were underway.

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Decisions on the allocation of the MRC's budget for the next financial year would be based on the outcomes of delivery of the 2019 objectives.

Members agreed that the update was very useful and commented that some of the objectives were clearly areas where continued joint working between Strategy Board and Council would be beneficial.

### **12. Council private business**

This item was deferred to the next meeting due to lack of time.

### **13. Outcome of the Francis Crick Institute establishment review**

Dr Rob Buckle introduced this item, which presented Council with the findings of the Francis Crick Institute establishment review. The review was undertaken to provide reassurance that the investment had been correctly set up since its establishment in 2015, that the appropriate governance structures and strategic direction had been established, and that the Institute was on track to be ready for its first QQR in 2021/22. Overall, the independent review panel was impressed by the Crick's accomplishment to date, and the progress towards achieving its mission. A number of recommendations had been made by the panel, including the development of qualitative and quantitative measurements of success aligned to the 'Discovery without Boundaries' strategy.

Members asked questions about the 6 + 6 employment model for early career researchers and the robustness of the review at the 6-year mid-term point. Dr Buckle explained that the Crick's approach to shifting the group leader demographic in favour of junior faculty is considered to be ambitious, with the potential to change how science is conducted in the UK.

Dr Louise Wood noted that the academic institutions involved in the Crick are all in receipt of NIHR Biomedical Research Centre funding and asked whether more could be done to foster closer collaboration between the institutions. Dr Wood further commented on the need for an integrated strategy for engagement with industry.

Members discussed the financial sustainability of the Institute, and questions were raised about the large operating costs and whether efficiencies could be made, the potential impact of loss of access to European funding. Members also highlighted opportunities for public engagement beyond the current range of activities, which included exhibition tours, live streaming of PhD events and the need for a broader range of spokespeople.

### **14. Annual update on Freedom of Information Requests**

Dr Rawle introduced this item, which provided Council with an annual update on activity relating to the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) / Environmental Information Regulations (EIR) and the operation of new UKRI processes. On 1 April 2018, UK Research and Innovation replaced the research councils and Innovate UK in the Freedom of Information Act and as a single legal entity, UKRI is now responsible for the responses to all requests submitted across the organisation. A new UKRI Information Governance group has been established to manage requests, liaise with Councils to gather relevant information and prepare responses, including the consideration of the application of exemptions. The MRC's Knowledge and Information Management team is part of this structure.

In 2018/19 MRC requests related to Chronic Fatigue Syndrome/Myalgic Encephalomyelitis (CFS/ME), mental health research and historic information relating to research on haemophilia, Factor VIII blood products and HIV/AIDS. The latter focus was clearly related to the launch of the Government's Infected Blood Inquiry. The Information Commissioners Office issued four Decision Notices on complaints about UKRI council requests relating to peer review. In each case the ICO

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agreed with the principles applied by the councils but for two cases the ICO did not agree with the decision taken and ordered the release of some information. In response to these decisions the Information Governance team will be working with UKRI Strategy to develop a policy outlining the principles of peer review and the approach to transparency. The MRC is closely involved in the development of this policy.

The potential resource requirements for providing files to the Infected Blood Inquiry were noted, and members inquired as to whether the MRC's paper records were being digitised. Dr Rawle clarified that old paper records are not routinely being digitised. A retention schedule has been implemented. Council agreed information presented in the report was useful and that it should continue to receive an annual report on activity relating to the Freedom of Information Act/Environmental Information Regulations.

### **15. Updates from the Executive**

Professor Watt introduced this item and informed Council that the updates provided within the paper were for information and any questions were welcome. Council noted the introduction of the Research Co-Investigator status as a positive step to providing early career researchers with recognition for their contribution made to grant proposals and to the subsequent research.

### **17. Any other business and close**

No other business was raised.