



03

Author: Simone Bryan

Trade Union Access: in part

### Minutes of the Council business meeting held at Manchester University on 3<sup>rd</sup> March 2020

<b>Attendees:</b>		
<b>MRC Council</b>	<b>Management Board</b>	<b>MRC Head Office</b>
Prof Fiona Watt	Rob Buckle	Kate Aylett
Dr Roger Highfield	Patrick Chinnery	Simone Bryan
Dr Precious Lunga	Hugh Dunlop	Morgan Crumbie
Mr Richard Murley	Frances Rawle	Ian Viney
Prof Jill Pell	Susan Simon	Adam Staines
Prof Sir Munir Pirmohamed departed at 14:45	Glenn Wells	
Prof Eleanor Riley		<b>Apologies</b>
Prof Irene Tracey		John Brown
Dr Pauline Williams	<b>UKRI</b>	Kim Graham
Dr Louise Wood	Emma Lindsell	John Iredale
	Darren O'Keefe	Mene Pangalos
		Graham Spittle
		Charlotte Watts

#### 1. Welcome and Apologies

Professor Fiona Watt welcomed everyone to the meeting and informed members that Mr Richard Murley would henceforth Chair the MRC Council meetings as the Senior Independent Member. Professor Watt welcomed new Council member, Dr Precious Lunga, to the meeting and stated that Professor Kim Graham would also be joining Council from 1 April.

Dr Glenn Wells would be joining the MRC as Director of Strategy and Planning on 1<sup>st</sup> April. Emma Lindsell, Executive Director of Strategy, was welcomed as the UKRI observer.

Apologies were received from Dr John Brown, Sir Mene Pangalos and Dr Graham Spittle, and Professors Kim Graham, John Iredale and Charlotte Watts.

Professor Watt formally thanked Sir Mene Pangalos in his absence, who was demitting from Council. A letter would be sent thanking him for his eight-year service to the MRC. A recruitment exercise for new Council members would shortly commence. Members were asked to send any suggestions to the office and make their contacts aware of the opportunity.

## **2. Register of declared interests**

Mr Murley requested that members who had not yet returned their annual update for the register of declared interests do so as soon as possible.

## **3. Minutes of the Joint Strategy Board and Council meeting held on 10 December 2019**

The minutes of the Joint Strategy Board and Council Meeting were approved as an accurate record of the meeting.

### **3a. Council Business meeting held 10 December 2019**

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

### **3b. Joint Strategy Board and Council Dinner discussion**

The minutes of the Joint Strategy Board and Council Dinner discussion were approved as an accurate record.

### **3c. Matters Arising: Quarterly Operations Update**

Members noted the quarterly operations dashboard provided in the papers. The high turnover rate of over 30% at UKRI was highlighted and members were informed that a large proportion of this would be due to short-term contracts related to Brexit but that UKRI would look at this more closely.

## **4. Long Term Evaluation Strategy**

Dr Ian Viney introduced this item and presented Council with a proposed long-term evaluation strategy. Dr Viney provided an overview of the MRC Evaluation and Analysis team which uses qualitative and quantitative data to evaluate and inform MRC activities, primarily focusing on formal evaluations of programmes and areas of interest. There would be new opportunities in research evaluation due to a data revolution including: Researchfish, the move to Open Access and new commercial providers of tools for the analysis of research information. However, it should be noted that research management data are fragmented and often of poor quality. A central team at the MRC with deep understanding of the data, who could apply different approaches to interpreting and exploiting it, was therefore important. There were also many opportunities to improve research evaluation by implementing multidisciplinary approaches.

Dr Viney outlined three areas large evaluation projects that had recently been delivered, including a review of the MRC translational portfolio, the UK Health Research Analysis and Early Career Researcher analysis. The review of MRC translational research, delivered in partnership with Ipsos Mori and Technopolis, had been well received and the methods developed for the evaluation had attracted interest from international organisations and would be utilised in further projects by Ipsos Mori. The UK Health Research Analysis is the largest compilation of health research funding in the UK and had become a trusted and influential

source of information. The data and figures reported were frequently quoted and provide evidence on the UK health research landscape. A project on Early Career Researchers (ECRs) examined how many MRC funded ECRs had secured a substantive research programme within three years of their initial award. This had been an informative piece of work and a paper had been published on bioRxiv. It was hoped this would be widely read and critiqued to become a fully peer reviewed paper. Expanding on the evaluation of ECRs follow-on funding would be part of the forward programme of work.

Dr Viney proposed future plans for the evaluation and analysis team which would seek to review more than 80% of the whole MRC portfolio over a five-year period. The focus would be to develop a better understanding of MRC research progress, productivity, quality and future opportunities. The proposed plans did not include evaluations for individual research programmes as they would be part of standard business and delivered alongside the proposed programme. The proposed work plan was guided by the underpinning themes of the MRC Delivery Plan. The plans outlined included four main activities.

1. Further analysis of ECRs to understand the difference MRC support for ECRs makes, particularly compared to other funders. The data on the original cohort would be extended, and ECRs who had MRC funding declined would also be in scope. This would be conducted with close working with the Training and Careers groups in MRC and UKRI Central.
2. Assessing the impact of MRC studentships, which is an area of interest for all UKRI councils and research funders internationally. The MRC activity would focus on where valuable contributions could be made to the wider activities, however a significant amount of work would be needed to clean and prepare the data in order to contribute to wider projects. The project would aim to assess the wider outcomes of MRC studentships and the longer-term impacts.
3. Strengthening the evidence of progress from MRC research institutes. This project would build on the work conducted with the Francis Crick Institute during its first five years development. Key activities would include facilitating a workshop to bring together UK and international research institutes, research assessors and research evaluators to encourage the generation of shared definitions and capture crucial elements of how institutes wish to be measured.
4. Opportunities for a more diverse regional MRC spend. This would seek to utilise data sets to identify opportunities for the MRC in the future. Currently approximately sixty per cent of MRC funding is focussed in London, Oxford and Cambridge. Analysis would include where industry invests in R&D, where NHS Trusts have research activity and the portfolios of other research funders. This would provide an opportunity to utilise data in a new way in a strategy setting context.

In addition to the four core programmes of work, the evaluation and analysis team would also support other projects being led by UKRI and other funders; including activities related to research on research and continuing to underpin the current review of the MRC Unit and Centre portfolio.

Dr Viney commented that for all evaluation work the MRC seeks advice and input from colleagues across UKRI through the Performance and Evaluation Network. The central team would increasingly become a useful resource with statisticians and economists being recruited. Increased collaboration across UKRI and building capacity to ensure the organisation continues to use evidence and evaluation to inform strategy would be important.

Council welcomed this summary of recent and planned activity evaluating the work of the MRC and raised several questions and suggestions. Members commented on the areas that would not be prioritised over the next 18 months such as global health. Dr Viney confirmed that the evaluation team was currently working closely with the global health team to develop a theory

of change and establish baselines to lay the foundations for a major programme of evaluation in several years' time, when the new Applied Global Health Board would be more established, and outcomes from GCRF and other global health programmes would be more prevalent.

Members were supportive of the proposed work on studentships but questioned how this would input into the broader work being conducted by UKRI and commented there could be interesting comparators across the different Councils. Dr Viney confirmed that the team, would be working closely with UKRI Central, but the MRC led work would be preparatory to ensure that the MRC would be well positioned to input into broader UK and international programmes. Council commented on the need for clarity regarding the use of the term ECR; for many organisations this would include post-doctoral researchers whereas this activity was addressing the career stage of transition to independence. Clinical research fellows would be a particularly important group to understand onward trajectories and the impact of MRC support, and could contribute to ongoing work to understand how clinicians can be supported to be more research active. Members suggested the qualitative interviews previously conducted with ECRs could inform the development of questionnaires to increase the qualitative data collected. The inclusion of qualitative data across all evaluations would add richness and context.

Members discussed the quality of self-reported data and duplicative activities that researchers are often asked to complete. Researchfish provides one system used by all funders but there needs to be more interoperability across other systems used by universities to reach a principle of 'enter once and reuse widely'. UKRI central is currently conducting a review to ascertain if Researchfish captures all necessary information and if there are other ways of collecting some of the data and research outputs. There are potential opportunities to extract data on publication outputs through automatic linkage to grant references and text mining approaches for data sets that could be utilised. Members suggested that there could be valuable lessons learnt from other industries such as financial services regarding the use of precise analytics to quantify certain outputs.

Members agreed that being clear about the purpose of an evaluation and the reasons it was being conducted was important, whether this was to improve internal processes or to provide evidence to UKRI central or government. It was important to not waste resources evaluating activities that would not be conducted in the future.

Council approved the proposed work plan and would look forward to receiving updates as projects progressed.

## **5. Finance Report**

Council noted the finance update provided by Mr Hugh Dunlop. The MRC budget for 20/21 would not be known until after the budget on 11<sup>th</sup> March. The initial working assumption for the draft budget is a flat settlement which would be revised once the settlement was known. Council would be updated in May when more detail would be available.

It was expected that budgets would meet targets at year end. There had been a capital underspend due to delays to the new LMS building but this had been offset by a temporary virement to core R&D to bring forward support to UK Biobank core funding.

## **6. UKRI Strategy Development update**

Emma Lindsell provided an update on the development of UKRI 2025 and UKRI's place strategy. Council was thanked for their earlier input into UKRI 2025 at the December meeting which, along with the views of the other constituent UKRI Councils, is informing the

development of the strategy. The schematic shared at the previous meeting was still the main anchor of the overall approach, but this would continue to develop following iteration with stakeholders. Executive Committee was playing a key role and the Executive Chairs were continuing to develop the overarching goals to guide ambitions on what UKRI would aim to achieve over the next 5-10 years. The underpinning foundations were also undergoing further development with a final strategy due to be published by the end of the year. It would not be possible to finalise a strategy until the outcome of the spending review was known, as it would be crucial to know the scale of ambition for UKRI. There was uncertainty as to whether the upcoming budget announcement would contain the positive action needed to reach the 2.4% goal or if the spending review would go ahead in the summer due to the increasing pressure from the coronavirus outbreak directing HMT's attention. There would be considerable uncertainty ahead in the current global circumstances and it would be important to work with the community to manage expectations during challenging times. A new Chief Executive would be joining UKRI in the next year and it would also be crucial to receive input and endorsement from them before finalising a strategy. However, UKRI would use the time to continue to deepen thinking and consult the wider community. A discussion document would be published to address the scale of ambition the country would need to reach the 2.4% target and deliver on the proposed UKRI goals. Well informed structured engagement events would be held to shape the strategy and ensure UKRI was working effectively with partners across government departments, academia, charities and industry. This would help to develop a more externally visible profile for UKRI which up to now had been more internally facing.

UKRI was also looking at its operating model and examining capabilities across the Councils, including how decisions were made, how Councils work together and how to add value to ensure they become more than the sum of their parts. A key consideration was how to determine what success should look like and how best to measure performance and impact.

Ms Lindsell updated Council on the continued development of a UKRI place strategy. The UKRI Board would be reviewing a proposed strategy at a forthcoming meeting. David Sweeney, Executive Chair of Research England, would propose a three-pillar approach. This would include, specific place focused funding, such as the Strength in Places Fund and how this could be scaled and delivered most effectively; how to use a number of interventions across the UKRI portfolio, for example what weighting to give to infrastructure investment; and how to foster local and national co-creation. The aim would be to establish key principles to address the place agenda, with a core focus on maintaining excellence by building on existing and emerging strengths. Increasing funding for areas of demonstratable potential for growth and targeting investments to local needs would be important factors. Partnership with national and local government, civic leaders and industry would be crucial to exploit opportunities to leverage activity and interventions to support local research and innovation strengths that may be best led by others.

Council welcomed this update and agreed that place was an important area with a number of opportunities. Members highlighted other related activities including discussions at a forthcoming meeting of the Office for Strategic Co-ordination of Health Research (OSCHR) on what 'place' means for health research and how health funders can align activities. Department of Health and Social Care's National Institute for Health Research (DHSC-NIHR) was encouraging the involvement of public and patients who would be most impacted by research which would provide a key role in supporting local authorities. There are number of activities in the health space that support the place agenda including the Born in Bradford study and the most recent Michael Marmot review, it was important to highlight examples of what the research community was already doing. Members questioned some of the nuancing around adopting a generic 'place' strategy including the need to address urbanisation and social and economic disparities within a region. There will be many places with strengths in development and innovation, but not basic research and it would be important to exploit these.

## 7. Council Forward Look for 2021/22

Simone Bryan introduced the 2021/22 forward plan for Council business. The plans were guided by MRC's day to day business and would be subject to change depending on emerging priorities. There would be five meetings held per year including two joint meetings with Strategy Board in July and December, a regional engagement meeting held in March, and two standard business meetings.

Members supported the overall plans and welcomed the proposal to hold two joint meetings with Strategy Board as these offered a rich opportunity for discussion. Members suggested that Belfast, Glasgow or the Midlands could be potential venues for the regional meeting and requested that the office conduct some analysis on recent visits and current activities to ensure a suitable location was chosen. Council requested that sustainability should be a consideration in choosing a location and an update on the UKRI and MRC sustainability strategy should be added to the forward plan. Council proposed that in general the meetings should focus on one or two major items for detailed discussion with other items for shorter updates or action.

## 8. Science Commitment budget

Dr Rob Buckle introduced this item and provided an overview of the proposal for the 2020/21 science commitment budget. This was the third stage of review by Council and the office had developed two options following recommendations in December. Dr Buckle informed members that announcements on future UKRI/MRC funding were expected in the Budget scheduled for 11 March 2020, but it was not yet known if this would be a single year or multi-year settlement. The former was more likely however, which could be a single year roll-over of current budgets ('flat-cash') or allow for inflation ('flat-real'). An earlier indication is possible, but in the absence of this it would be prudent to plan the commitment budget on a 'flat-cash' basis.

Flat-cash would mean a 2020/21 commitment budget for research of £320m. The two options presented for Council's consideration both focused on enhancing the budgets for translation and training, with one doing this at the expense of other budget lines and one maintaining these through 'over committing'. The fiscally conservative option would mean a slight reduction in budget for the Boards and some panels, and the Strategy Board budget reduced to cover just the LMS QQR. The option to overcommit would be with a strong expectation that budgets would be increased in subsequent years.

Council questioned the impact of a reduction in Strategy Board's budget. Dr Buckle confirmed that Strategy Board would be restricted to scoping and planning rather than actively supporting and launching any new strategic programmes. However, as long-term budgets were still unknown it would not be sensible to begin any new strategic initiatives this year and it may be possible to utilise other UKRI cross-cutting strategic funds. There is often a long lead time for large strategic requests and there are currently none expected.

Members discussed the proposed distribution of funds across the Research Boards, which primarily encompassed response-mode funding but also included support for existing strategic initiatives, QQR demands, cohorts and other large investments. The different tensions across the Boards are taken into consideration, based upon an analysis of a three-year rolling cycle of demand, unit and centre renewals and other strategic commitments. This multi-factored approach means that some of the percentage decreases in budgets appear more dramatic than they are, for example demand for funding through PSMB has been decreasing and the previous year's budget had included an uplift for the renewal of ALSPAC. Overall the commitment budget available through the Boards would be decreased by 2-4%.

Council confirmed it would support the option to prioritise training and translation with a reduction in other budgets, based on the assumption of a flat-cash settlement. However, if there was a more favourable budget settlement the office had approval to implement an increase in the budget up to the level of the 'overcommit' option, focussed on the Board budgets. Council confirmed that Management Board would have the delegated authority to vary the 2020/21 budget lines by up to 10% to manage fluctuations that may arise due to differences in predicted versus actual commitments. Within each budget line the budget holder would continue to have the authority to move funding between schemes if necessary. Reallocating funds to different areas towards the end of the financial year was routinely undertaken, normally in the range of £1-5m overall, based upon balancing occasional under-commitment within some budget lines with the unmet need to fund high quality applications in other areas; this would continue within the 10% tolerance as agreed. Council requested that the scheme of delegation was shared with members for transparency.

Members questioned if prioritising training and translation funding was setting a long-term trajectory for an uplift in these areas at the expense of supporting response-mode funding for grants through the Boards. Dr Buckle commented it was a particularly unusual situation to only plan for the next 12 months and that the proposed model would still provide flexibility to refocus funding in the future once longer-term allocations were known.

Council agreed that the three-phase iterative process in developing the budget had been effective and the same approach should be used in the future. The discussions over the next year would hopefully develop a four to five-year plan so detailed thinking and discussions would be crucial.

## **9. Coronavirus Update**

Dr Fiona Watt provided an update on the rapid response activities undertaken by MRC to respond to the recent COVID-19 outbreak. Following the Ebola outbreak in 2014-2016 a number of activities were instigated to ensure a more joined up global approach was developed in preparation for the next infectious disease outbreak. In the UK the UK Vaccine Network was established in 2015 to bring together academia, industry and the public sector. This has invested in two Future Vaccine Manufacturing Research Hubs based at Imperial College and University College London which has enabled the rapid deployment of work on COVID-19. The Coalition for Epidemic Preparedness Innovations (CEPI) was established in 2016 and the UK has contributed a total £30m to support the global development of a COVID-19 vaccine. Since the Ebola outbreak the World Health Organisation (WHO) has also developed improved priority setting and co-ordination for funders and research activity, which the MRC was utilising.

The MRC responded quickly to the news of an outbreak of a novel coronavirus at the end of 2019 and a Public Health Emergency of International Concern declared on 31<sup>st</sup> January. Together with the DHSC-NIHR the MRC launched two rapid calls for investment on 4<sup>th</sup> February, with a proposed turnaround time from launch to funding of just 6 weeks. The first call would support research on active intervention development focussing on vaccines and therapeutics and the panel was held on 2<sup>nd</sup> March. The second call would support research to diagnose and understand COVID-19 and focused on diagnostics, clinical, epidemiology, anthropology, social sciences, and other underpinning research. Both calls had several distinctive features including the short duration of 18 months, no financial limits and sharing of data and tools/reagents developed was crucial. Call one received 79 applications with funding requests ranging from less than £100,000 to more than £7 million and totaling £68m. Four projects have been recommended to Professor Chris Whitty for funding and other high-quality applications will be 'held over' to see if there are additional funds available after the second call. The second call received 211 applications with a total fund request of £120m. Three panels would be held in parallel on the 17<sup>th</sup> March to make funding recommendations. All

panels would receive briefing from DHSC to ensure members had the most up to date information on the disease outbreak.

In parallel Wellcome and the Department for International Development had held a joint call to strengthen the evidence base to better prevent and control COVID-19 epidemics and to increase research and response capacity. To ensure that no applications would fall through the gap between the concurrent activities and to avoid duplication, information on awards would be shared across the major funders including Wellcome, European Union, Canadian Institute for Health Research and CEPI.

In addition to the funding calls and co-ordinating activities the MRC had also provided additional funding to the MRC-University of Glasgow Centre for Virus Research, the MRC Centre for Global Infectious Disease Analysis (GIDA) at Imperial College London, and the MRC/UVRI & LSHTM Uganda Research Unit and the MRC Unit The Gambia. Funding had also been provided to the International Severe Acute Respiratory and Emerging Infection Consortium (ISARIC) in order to collect and share samples from COVID-19 patients.

Council thanked Professor Watt for the update and acknowledged the excellent work that had been done by Head Office staff to enable the rapid delivery of activities, particularly Dr Joanna Jenkinson, Dr Jonathan Pearce and Dr Anna Kinsey. Members questioned the diversity of the applications to the call which had seen a range of proposed interventions and therapeutics. Two of the recommended proposals involved the use of non-human primates, one of which was undergoing further review by the National Centre for Replacement, Refinement and Reduction of the Use of Animals in Research (NC3Rs).

Council welcomed the co-ordination and co-operation across funders and commented that the more information was shared, the quicker research outcomes could be implemented and impact the current crisis. Weekly phone calls being held with Wellcome, Public Health England, Patrick Vallance, Chris Whitty and industry representatives would help facilitate this.

Members questioned Professor Watt on the UKRI-MRC response as an employer and the business continuity plans in place. MRC Institutes each had their own plans in line with local needs and MRC Head Office staff would be covered by UKRI continuity plans. Tiered Gold, Silver and Bronze response teams had been put in place and work was underway to ensure the core business of funding panels could continue and that core operation functions such as payroll would not be interrupted.

## **10. Updates from the Executive**

Professor Watt informed Council that the updates provided within the paper were for information. The MRC London office would be relocating again to a new office on Stanford Street and further information would be provided once a date had been set. The new premises would hopefully provide a more stable supply of meeting rooms for large panels and boards than the current office.

## **11. Draft Agenda for the next Council meeting**

Members approved the topics suggested for the May Council meeting and reiterated the request to have an item on the UKRI sustainability strategy and MRC implementation at a forthcoming meeting.



## **12. AOB**

Professor Watt informed members that Professor Vincenzo Cerundolo, Director of the Human Immunology Unit at the MRC Weatherall Institute of Molecular Medicine had sadly passed away. Council members expressed their sympathies and condolences to Enzo's family, friends and colleagues. A meeting would be held in his honour at the Royal Society, MRC would be contributing to the programme and providing financial support for the event. A memorial service was planned for 9<sup>th</sup> May. An interim Director was in place at the Unit and a search for a new permanent Director would commence soon.

## **13. Council private business**

Following the meeting members held a private business meeting.