

MEDICAL RESEARCH COUNCIL



03

***Should not be viewed by Executive Chair
Due to Conflict of interest***

Author: Simone Bryan

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Minutes of the Council meeting held at the MRC Laboratory of Molecular Biology on 7 March 2019

Present:

Council	Head Office staff
Professor Fiona Watt (Executive Chair)	Dr Rob Buckle
	Mr Hugh Dunlop
Dr Roger Highfield	Dr Louise Leong
Mr Richard Murley	Dr Declan Mulkeen
Professor Jill Pell	Dr Frances Rawle
Professor Sir Munir Pirmohamed	Ms Susan Simon
Professor Eleanor Riley	Ms Simone Bryan
Dr Graham Spittle	Dr Katy Ingleby
Professor Irene Tracey	Mrs Helen Page
Dr Louise Wood	Dr Heike Weber
Professor Charlotte Watts	Professor Patrick Chinnery
Dr Mene Pangalos	
Professor John Iredale	Guests
Dr Pauline Williams	Professor Jennifer Rubin (items 8 and 9)
	Dr Jan Löwe (items 8 and 9)
UKRI Observer	Dr Kevin Moreton (items 8 and 9)
Dr Rebecca Endean	Professor Moira Whyte, via teleconference (item 12)
	Dr Julia Dickinson (item 12)
Apologies	
Dr John Brown	

1. Welcome and introductions

Professor Watt welcomed everyone to the meeting and introduced Professor Patrick Chinnery as the MRC's new clinical director. Professor Watt congratulated people in the New Year's Honours, including Donald Brydon who was awarded a Knighthood for services to business and charity.

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The chair then thanked members for participation in the annual Council self-evaluation and noted that through this process it was highlighted that all Council papers should have a clear purpose and action(s).

Apologies had been received from Dr John Brown, and it was noted that Professor John Iredale would need to leave the meeting at 12.00. Professor Iredale left the meeting after items 1-6 and 8, but before item 7. Dr Mene Pangalos left the meeting after items 1-10 and 12.

2. Register of declared interests

Professor Watt requested that members complete the annual update to their declarations of interest, and it was agreed that the secretariat would migrate existing information from existing declarations to the new UKRI declarations form and send to individual Council members for updating and sign off.

3. Minutes of the Council meeting held on 10 December 2018

There was one minor amendment to the minutes of Council business meeting under item seven:

Dr Endean explained that the Spending Review would take place in the 2019/20 financial year, and that the time period was not clear, but budgets might possibly only be agreed up to 2020/21.

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

4. Roles and responsibilities of Council and Strategy Board

Dr Frances Rawle introduced this item which followed on from a discussion at the Council meeting in December 2018. The paper set out a proposal for the distribution of advisory and decision-making responsibilities between Council, Strategy Board and Management Board in the light of changes to the Council remit, and the evolving requirements for input into development and implementation of the MRC's strategy within UKRI. Professor Watt asked Mr Murley to lead the discussion. Mr Murley welcomed the proposal and referred members in turn to each of the main work areas in delivering the functions of Council.

It was agreed that Strategy Board brings a broad set of research expertise to bear on research quality and deliverability in the MRC's strategy and should have continued responsibility for advising on scientific priorities and the planning and delivery of specific strategic initiatives. Council should have overall responsibility for MRC's strategy, in particular; addressing coherence and balance, major strategic choices, MRC's positioning relative to other parts of UKRI, and ensuring budgets, resources, major bids and spending review input reflects the MRC's strategy. Dr Endean clarified that the UKRI board has responsibility for checking the fit and coherence of the MRC's strategy within the context of overall UKRI strategy. Members agreed there are clearly areas where joint working between Strategy Board and Council are beneficial (for example in the development of the Strategic Delivery Plan (SDP) during 2018), and to this end joint meetings should continue on a regular basis, approximately twice a year.

Discussion of responsibilities relating to the budget allocation and financial oversight centred on the importance of ensuring money is well spent, and the requirement for Council to be more explicitly involved in the allocation of MRC's budget for new science commitments. A scheme of delegation for decisions on budget allocation would be helpful. Dr Endean emphasised that Council has a critical role in identifying new opportunities for health research and for collaborative working across research and innovation communities, and that highlighting these opportunities will need to form a significant component of major bids for UKRI funds. It was proposed that there should be an

opportunity for Executive Chairs to share summaries of their SDPs as a way of identifying areas for collaborative working, at the cross-UKRI Council members meeting on 1 April.

It was suggested that the proposed Council remuneration sub-committee should advise on senior appointments, and the executive confirmed that a fuller discussion on performance management will be the subject of a paper on performance indicators and regular reports for Council at the May meeting, followed by discussion of a portfolio review of MRC's large investments at the July meeting.

Overall members agreed that the proposal was helpful in providing clarity, but the relationship with central UKRI and a scheme of delegation for decisions on budget allocation should be included. A revised proposal will be prepared for approval at the July meeting.

5. Council forward look

Dr Rawle introduced this item which presented Council with the 2019/20 forward plan for Council business, recognising that agenda items are subject to change to reflect the discussion under the previous item, and pending the discussion of the item on performance management planned for the May meeting.

Members agreed that one meeting a year should be held at a research organisation to enable Council members to learn more about MRC's large research investments and for MRC funded staff at all levels to meet Council. Dr Roger Highfield suggested that regional meetings could have a theme. Members pressed the importance of a fuller discussion of the budget at the December meeting and the need for Council to receive regular evaluation reports and data from Researchfish on output, outcome and impact to inform discussion and decisions about budget allocation.

Professor Charlotte Watts proposed regular updates on major UKRI initiatives such as safeguarding, to understand how commitments are being acted upon, and to share best practice. Dr Endean clarified UKRI's policy on safeguarding. UKRI expects research institutions to promote a culture in which harm and abuse is less likely to happen and is working to raise standards of behaviour across the sector, rather than become involved in individual cases. Professor Watt suggested that Council receives regular updates from Professor Watts on Chief Scientific Advisors' priorities across government and members suggested an update from Professor Patrick Vallance could also be helpful. Dr Williams highlighted that there was little time on the forward plan dedicated to the MRC's public accountability and communications / stakeholder engagement and that Council's role in this should be made explicit.

6. Finance report

Hugh Dunlop informed Council of the draft operating budget for 2019/20 and the year-to-date result to end of January 2019. Mr Dunlop highlighted that the 2019/20 core programme resource allocation was 0.6 per cent lower than the 2018/19 allocation and this, combined with 'ring fenced' allocations, had reduced scope to initiate strategic projects. The draft budget exceeds the allocation by £7.7m due to the impact of loss of charitable status. Reprioritisation of funds are discussed at MRC's Management Board as per the scheme of delegation and is aligned with the MRC's strategy.

Discussion focused on how past decisions underpinned the financial modelling, and members agreed that evaluations of outputs and outcomes will be important in determining prioritisation of the MRC's budget in the future. Questions were asked about the adequacy of the budget for open access charges, and Dr Endean agreed to provide an update by e-mail on whether the overall budget for OA costs will increase for 2019/20. Council asked for an update on UKRI's Open Access Review at a future meeting. Mr Dunlop confirmed that the option to use existing grant funds to supplement Open Access budgets had been suggested to the Open Access Review team, but this has not been agreed.

7. Science commitment budget

Dr Declan Mulkeen presented Council with a summary of recent activity for supplementing core funds for health research, specifically; round two of the Strategic Priorities Fund (SPF), the first round of the Future Leaders' Fellowships (FLF), and an overview of the coming calls for the Fund for International Collaboration (FIC) and the Industrial Strategy Challenge Fund (ISCF). It was noted that round two of the SPF could result in an extra £80-90m for health research. Health and biomedical research was well supported in the first round of Future Leaders Fellowships, and it was realistic to expect that, of the 550 awards in the first three years (£850m), more than 20% might be in areas important for MRC.

Questions were raised as to whether there were any plans to strategically focus the Future Leaders' Fellowships to strengthen particular areas of research. Dr Mulkeen confirmed that at present there was no strategic focus, but this option was not ruled out for future rounds. Mr Murley asked how the scheme of delegation worked for supplementary funds. Research bids are developed with expert input from, at least, board chairs and the MRC's Strategy Board, developed further by the executive and input from partners (e.g. other Research Councils), and authorised by the Executive Chair.

Dr Rob Buckle presented the proposed breakdown for the 2019/20 science commitment budget. The overall science budget had been protected in the spending review (2016/17 to 2020/21) with cash increases for the MRC of nearly six per cent over the period. However, this was largely based on additional Official Development Assistance funding and earmarked funding for the UK Dementia Research Institute. Dr Buckle emphasised that the 2019/20 financial year is the most challenging year within the current Comprehensive Spending Review (CSR) period, and commitment plans will need careful management.

Dr Buckle outlined the factors underpinning the allocation of the MRC's budget across research and forms of support, specifically; demand and quality, large investments, and strategic initiatives, and how changes in demand over time are managed. Members challenged the MRC's attitude to risk and the ability to take advantage of opportunities, particularly for investment in high risk, disruptive science. Dr Buckle confirmed that the MRC's model of institutes, which allows for long term, flexible investment has shown to be the most impactful in delivering novel, high risk approaches.

Council members highlighted a number of issues for further consideration, including the methodology used for budget allocations and whether other approaches should be considered, the appropriateness of board remits, better understanding of factors driving response mode demand, the impact of the Confidence in Concept and Experimental Medicine schemes, and messaging on future funding opportunities, particularly the continued support for experimental medicine. The proposed allocation of commitment budgets was approved, and authority was delegated to Management Board to make in-year adjustments.

8. Equality, diversity and inclusion update

Professor Watt welcomed Professor Jennifer Rubin, chair of the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) to the meeting. Professor Rubin updated Council on UKRI's Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) Strategy which includes the commissioning of three evidence reviews to understand EDI challenges and successful interventions in Research and Innovation, which will build an evidence base to drive rigorous policy development. An External Advisory Group has been formed to identify and prioritise areas that will make the most progress and improve outcomes in this area, using a systems-wide approach that will seek to understand how organisational structures, processes, cultures and environment affect this issue. Professor Rubin outlined UKRI's role of championing and modelling equality, diversity and inclusion across the research and innovation sector and of creating a culture that facilitates opportunities for all to be respected and treated fairly.

Council members stressed the importance of building on the work of existing programmes such as Stonewall and Athena Swan and questions were raised about whether achieving a silver or gold award of the Athena Swan charter for women in science should be a condition for eligibility for funding. Professor Rubin outlined that whilst the Athena Swan programme was driving behaviour change, it was not the sole solution, and this should not be mandated as a condition of eligibility for funding. Rather, UKRI should work with research organisations to proactively shape environments that facilitate equality and inclusivity. Support for the development and implementation of effective practices especially in recruitment, career development and performance management was discussed, as was the need for the total UK funding landscape and industry to work together in this area to implement proven best practice.

9. Annual update on gender balance at the MRC Laboratory of Molecular Biology

Professor Watt welcomed Professor Jan Löwe, Director of the MRC Laboratory for Molecular Biology (LMB), to the meeting. Professor Löwe gave the annual update to Council on gender balance at the MRC LMB. The figures showed that gender balance is poor amongst senior group leaders and that there are currently no female Heads of Division. However, there is improved recruitment and a much better balance at earlier career stages. Professor Löwe outlined plans for long-term solutions to improving gender balance at senior career stages, which included nurturing and retention of female junior group leaders as they progress, as well as external recruitment at junior and senior levels, centralisation and increased transparency in recruitment, promotion and reward, and support for tailored training and careers advice. There were also plans to publish a book celebrating the careers of women at LMB.

Council members welcomed the actions being undertaken but agreed that more could be done to improve gender balance. Professor Riley commented that a clear action plan would be useful and questioned why actions to redress gender balance were mainly being led by women. Gender balance is an organisational issue and development and implementation of interventions to improve gender balance should have commitment and participation from individuals across the organisation as a whole. Professor Tracey raised the importance of understanding reasons why women were leaving LMB once they had reached the senior group leader stage. Routinely conducting exit interviews could be useful. Professor Tracey commented that while the book celebrating women researchers at the LMB would be useful in promoting the careers of women, more should be done to recognise women's contribution to the success of the LMB, through a suite of wider communication activities.

Other suggestions included the offer of part-time working, a comprehensive leadership training programme for both male and female researchers which includes training on equality, diversity and inclusion, and the need to increase the ratio of female to male researchers at the tenure-track career stage (currently ~50M:50F) in order to offset later attrition.

10. Strategic Delivery Plan

Dr Mulkeen presented Council with a near final draft of the MRC Strategic Delivery Plan (SDP). The written comments from Strategy Board and Council members, and feedback received at the joint meeting in December had been incorporated to produce the current draft. This draft had been considered by the UKRI Board in January 2019 and initial feedback was provided by Sir Mark Walport and Dame Sally Davies on behalf of the UKRI Board. The MRC SDP had been generally well received, but MRC was asked to enhance the specificity of the near-term actions (2019/20). The updated draft takes account of this feedback and has been edited by a UKRI copy editor to align language and style across UKRI.

Images will be used to enhance the messages within the SDP and images for the front cover and body of the SDP are currently being sourced. A designed proof of the SDP will be circulated to

Council members once this is available. Whilst SDPs are expected to be finalised in April, publication is now most likely in June.

Council members commented that reference to the devolved administrations needs to be included in the foreword. Council agreed to delegate authority to the Executive Chair for final sign off of the MRC's SDP.

11. Spending Review update

Dr Mulkeen introduced this item and provided Council with an update on the preparations for the 2019 Spending Review (SR).

The draft of UKRI's initial SR advice for BEIS, shared with Council in December, had since been finalised and submitted to BEIS. The draft set out the high-level strategies and investments required for delivering the Government's 2.4% ambition and outlines UKRI's likely response in alternative funding scenarios. MRC had also developed aligned priorities for the UKRI Infrastructure Roadmap.

Dr Mulkeen outlined what can be expected in a spending review, including the debates about potential changes to the balance in funding and the development of new 'big ideas'. There will be opportunities for Council to engage over the next few months to further refine spending priorities, including thematic areas for support, expected levels of funding, and priorities for early action in the SR period.

Noting the need to combine solid evidence and plans with inspiring vision, Dr Roger Highfield highlighted the importance of language used in the top-level messages for capturing the attention of government – the presentations to date were only suitable for internal audiences.

Dr Endean emphasised the importance of building the strongest possible case to Government in the Spending Review submissions, especially for core budgets, and the significance of response mode funding for underpinning the strength of the UK research base, and how this in turn attracts and grows new businesses in the UK. Dr Graham Spittle highlighted the opportunity for the MRC to increase spend on Artificial Intelligence and quantum computing, given its broad application to health research, and the potential this may bring for disruptive technologies and increased innovation. Professor Watts stressed the need for attention to be given to potential areas of joint working between the MRC and government departments. Further discussion is planned for May and July Council meetings.

12. Review of senior fellowships

Professor Watt welcomed Professor Moira Whyte (via teleconference) and Dr Julia Dickinson to the meeting. Following discussion at the October Council and Strategy Board meeting, Professor Whyte presented Council with options and recommendations for the MRC's fellowship support after the intermediate career stage, which included piloting transitional support for intermediate fellows after their fellowship, and a revised approach to senior fellowships.

Council members commented that transitional support should give universities the flexibility to manage their budgets effectively in order to commit to offering open-ended posts to individuals beyond the tenure of their fellowship. Concerns were raised over the high attrition rate for clinical academics at the intermediate career stage: the MRC has an important national role in supporting clinical academic careers in its areas of activity.

Members commented that amendments to the senior fellowship schemes carry some reputational risk; the schemes are well-known, and are visible, high-profile routes for early career researchers to aspire to. Messaging for a revised approach to senior fellowships will need to be carefully managed to reflect this.

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It was noted that Council members affiliated with the Universities of Cambridge, Oxford and Edinburgh potentially have an institutional conflict given the benefit of the current senior fellowship schemes to these organisations.

13. MRC risk register

Dr Frances Rawle presented Council with the MRC corporate risk register. Members noted the paper update on the development of the risk management process within UKRI.

Dr Rawle confirmed that some items on the MRC risk register had now been migrated to the UKRI corporate risk register.

14. 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 that the loss of STEM pay flexibility was causing issues in retention and recruitment at the MRC LMB.

15. Any other business and close

No other business was raised.

Following the formal business meeting Council had a private meeting, followed by the opportunity to hear from three of the Directors of Cambridge-based large investments: Dr Löwe from LMB, Professor Matt Lambon-Ralph from the Cognition and Brain Sciences Unit and Professor Tony Green from the Wellcome – MRC Cambridge Stem Cell Institute.