

MEDICAL RESEARCH COUNCIL



03

Author: Simone Bryan

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Minutes of the Council business meeting, held via zoom videoconference, on 7 May 2020

Attendees		
MRC Council/MB	Management Board	MRC Head Office
Professor Fiona Watt	Dr Rob Buckle	Rachel Benny
Mr Richard Murley (Chair)	Professor Patrick Chinnery	Simone Bryan
Dr John Brown	Professor Anna Dominiczak	Becky Smith
Professor Kim Graham	Hugh Dunlop	Kate Aylett (item 9)
Professor John Iredale	Dr Frances Rawle	Toni-jo Henderson (item 8)
Dr Precious Lunga joined at 2.30pm	Dr Susan Simon	
Professor Jill Pell	Dr Glenn Wells	Observers
Professor Eleanor Riley		Dr Adam Staines
Dr Graham Spittle	UKRI	
Professor Irene Tracey	Isobel Stephen	
Dr Pauline Williams departed at 4pm		Guests
Dr Louise Wood	Apologies	Dr Jan Lowe (item 6)
	Professor Sir Munir Pirmohamed	Sir Paul Nurse (item 7)
	Professor Charlotte Watts	
	Dr Roger Highfield	

1. Welcome and Apologies

Given the most recent advice to avoid all non-essential contact with others and unnecessary travel, the May Council business meeting was held via Zoom videoconference.

Mr Richard Murley welcomed everyone to the meeting and welcomed new Council member, Professor Kim Graham, who joined Council on 1 April.

Apologies were received from Sir Munir Pirmohamed, Dr Roger Highfield, and Professor Charlotte Watts.

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 Council business meeting held on 3 March 2020

The minutes of the Council Business Meeting held at the University of Manchester on 3 March 2020 were approved as an accurate record of the meeting.

The summaries of dinner discussions on 2 March and stakeholder engagement activities on the morning of 3 March were noted.

Members noted that future Council meeting agendas would focus on two or three larger items that needed discussion and decision, with less time allocated to items primarily for information.

4. Finance Report

Mr Hugh Dunlop presented Council with the end of year finance report detailing the draft 2020/21 Operating Budget and the provisional outturn for financial year 2019/20. Allocations for the budget were not expected until early June. It was expected that the COVID-19 pandemic would have significant financial impacts on budgets, both in 2020/21 and into subsequent years. Early indications suggest the budget may be reset against a 'flat real' scenario within UKRI, with additional budget to alleviate pressures, and redirect of underspends towards funding of COVID-19 research. Outturn was lower than forecast and main movements included core R&D, core administration and lower spend on other programmes such as the UKRI Future Leaders Fellowship programme (hosted by MRC).

Members noted the update.

5. COVID-19 Business Continuity Update

The MRC's Executive Chair, Professor Fiona Watt, Chief Science Officer Dr Rob Buckle, and Chief Operating and Finance Officer, Mr Hugh Dunlop, updated Council on MRC's COVID-19 Business Continuity activity. The ongoing situation regarding coronavirus had significantly impacted the research community and MRC staff. The nature of the impacts was evolving but the MRC was working hard to identify new issues as they emerge and providing answers and support wherever possible across a range of mechanisms. MRC head office was closed, with staff working from home and being redirected to areas of priority where possible. Teams had been encouraged to have regular virtual contact and weekly team meetings, and MRC had increased its provision of resources to support mental health and well-being. MRC Institute staff had prioritised essential laboratory work that needed to continue, and this was going ahead with appropriate social distancing, although many institute staff were also working from home. Planning for recovery was being undertaken and UKRI was waiting for further government advice on returning to work.

Council was presented with a summary of COVID-19 research supported through MRC's recent rapid response calls, support for national platforms, the research response of MRC's Unit, Centres and Institutes, coordination across funders and the implementation of new rolling calls, both pan UKRI and in partnership with Government. Council was also updated on the emerging strategic landscape and taskforce activity, and the support available through MRC's flexible funding policies.

The MRC had 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 31st January 2020. The initial response, taken together with the Department of Health and Social Care - National Institute for Health Research (DHSC-NIHR), was to launch two rapid calls for investment on 4th February, with a turnaround time of 6 weeks from launch to funding. The first call supported research on active intervention development focussing on vaccines and therapeutics. The second call supported research to diagnose and understand COVID-19 and focused on diagnostics, clinical, epidemiology, anthropology, social sciences, and other underpinning research. A total of 27 projects had been funded covering vaccine development, clinical trials and epidemiological studies.

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This was followed by the establishment of a rolling call by the MRC and DHSC-NIHR, with the research priorities to be addressed informed by the World Health Organisation Research Roadmap. In parallel a rolling call had been launched by UKRI, covering non-biomedical aspects such as social sciences, which recognised that the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic will be far reaching beyond health. UKRI was also launching two international calls in partnership with DHSC and Department for International Development, one of which would be MRC led. The wide-ranging response of MRC Institutes, Units and Centres to the COVID-19 pandemic was outlined, spanning outbreak modelling, the molecular characterisation of COVID-19, the rapid whole genome sequencing of the virus, a clinical trial of potential therapeutic interventions in The Gambia, and the establishment of a national data platform. The MRC/DHSC call had funded the Accelerating COVID-19 Research and Development platform (ACCORD), and the RECOVERY trial network, to establish a new national clinical trial initiative funded through UKRI, DHSC/NIHR, and partnered with industry and Government. This represented the world's largest clinical trial programme and aimed to gain an early indication of therapeutic effectiveness of approved (repurposed) medicines. Notably it was reducing the time taken to set up clinical studies, with regulatory approvals secured within 5 days instead of the usual 3-6 months. Isobel Stephen commented that UKRI is ensuring that systems work well, and people are well supported to continue to pay grants and deliver funding schemes. Broader longer term work to make sure the research ecosystem, researchers and businesses are supported in the immediate term was being undertaken, as was planning for recovery.

Council acknowledged the excellent work that had been done by Head Office staff to enable the rapid delivery of activities and commended the work undertaken to reduce timelines in securing regulatory approval for clinical trials. Members commented that where practicable, efficiencies should be adopted for future ways of working and it was highlighted that speeding up call turn-around and regulatory approval times had demanded significant resource, which would need to be factored into new ways of working if rapid turn-around times were to be maintained. Members expressed disappointment that there was little visibility of MRC's contribution in communications about the important work it is delivering to tackle to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Mr Dunlop gave an overview of how the impacts of the pandemic were being managed within UKRI budget. There had been several unplanned MRC investments to address the pandemic which were being mitigated through access to the UKRI COVID-19 fund. Charity partners of MRC investments, which provide 20% of MRC's total income, were facing significant financial pressures and with strategic investments being reliant on stable co-funding, a reduction in co-funding had the potential to damage MRC investments. The largest risk exposure related to two of MRC's partnership institutes, the Crick and UK DRI. MRC's Executive Chair was working with UKRI to manage these risks. There had been a slowdown in activity in MRC Institutes and Units and across the wider portfolio, with a redirection of underspends in support of the pandemic, which could impact MRC schemes such as Confidence in Concept, which historically had been funded through underspends. Delays in capital projects such as the new building for London Institute of Medical Sciences and the relocation of the Toxicology Unit would lead to significant additional costs being incurred. The MRC was also modelling the budgetary implications of costed extensions for PhD and grant extensions. The true impact on the budget may not fully manifest itself until later in the year and reach into future financial years.

Members questioned how MRC had been working with its major investments for long term planning purposes. The MRC executive team and senior staff had strong links and close relationships with its major investments through membership on various committees and boards. Regular meetings were taking place with both co-funders and senior staff at MRC major investments. Professor Watt commented that UKRI was well-sighted of the various sectors that intersected with the MRC, and that work was being undertaken to see how UKRI could support Institutes and universities through the current and recovery periods.

6. Laboratory of Molecular Biology Operation update

Dr Jan Löwe, Director of MRC's Laboratory of Molecular Biology (LMB), updated Council on some of the LMB's recent work including; work on processes regulating cell division, synthesis of the *E. coli* genome and determining the structure of protein filaments associated with neurodegenerative diseases. Plans to expand future research in functional connectomics and artificial biology, which would require an increase in budget at the next quinquennial review, were outlined, while it was hoped that an extension to funding for the LMB's research collaboration with AstraZeneca could be secured. Operational issues and the impact of the coronavirus pandemic on staff and delivery of research were summarised. The LMB building had been closed since 24 March and all staff were working from home, with the exception of around 50 individuals who were working on COVID-19 research, and maintaining the building, equipment and animal colonies. As a basic science institution, the LMB was not well positioned to work on applied areas such as COVID-19 testing, so COVID-19 research projects were being concentrated on uncovering lesser known aspects of the biology of the sars-cov-2 virus, which would have implications for therapeutic approaches as the pandemic progresses. A recovery plan for reopening the building had been developed which would allow all laboratory based work to continue, with appropriate personal protective equipment and social distancing in place.

The Director highlighted that overall the LMB ran very well but running / maintenance costs of the building competed with the costs of science and this could be difficult to manage without more local flexibility to operate the budget. There was a lack of amenities and facilities at the Cambridge Biomedical Campus, where the LMB is based, and additional capital funding could help to address this. The lack of flexibility in pay, delays in the pay deal and approval of senior salaries, and the restrictions on recruitment of international students were major barriers for recruitment and retention of excellent researchers, including the very best students. Questions were asked about the nature of the pay restrictions and Ms Stephen confirmed that the previous pay flexibility for senior scientific staff at MRC Institutes had been removed by BEIS. UKRI was aware of the issue and was working with BEIS to address it. Members agreed that more local flexibility to operate the budget would help to address these operational challenges, but additional funding to provide amenities for the Cambridge Biomedical Campus would more appropriately be sought through the University of Cambridge and the local Council.

Members enquired about the level of collaboration taking place nationally and internationally and whether the planned work in artificial biology would join up with research involving humans. It was confirmed that every research group based at LMB had between three to five collaborations and major collaborators included Astra Zeneca and the Rosalind Franklin Institute. As artificial biology was a new area of science for LMB, research would initially build on LMB's research expertise in invertebrates and small mammals, although its implications for medical application were clear.

It was noted that support from the UKRI communications team was needed to replace the old signage at the building with the new branding in a way that clearly showed LMB is part of the MRC family.

7. Update from the Francis Crick Institute

Professor Sir Paul Nurse joined the meeting to provide an update from the Francis Crick Institute on the impact of coronavirus on staff, delivery of research and finances, and the Crick's recent refocusing of staff and resources towards the provision of coronavirus testing for hospitals and care homes in the local community in response to the current pandemic. Sir Paul highlighted that the independent review panel set up for the Francis Crick Institute establishment review reported that it was impressed by the Crick's accomplishment to date and the progress towards achieving its mission, and that appropriate governance structures were in place. The Gateway Reviews had also shown that the Crick establishment programme had been successfully implemented and the Institute was now starting to prepare for its quinquennial review (QQR) in 2021/22, although the coronavirus pandemic was impacting upon preparations. The Crick's recruitment strategy and its 6+6 employment model were outlined, which focussed on shifting the group leader demographic in favour of junior faculty,

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and providing support to early careers researchers to transition to research leadership positions in other Research Organisations after completing 12 years at the Crick.

The Francis Crick building had not closed during the coronavirus pandemic, but numbers of staff on site had reduced from around 1500 to 200. The institute had rapidly transformed laboratories into testing facilities, and refocused research efforts to answer fundamental questions about the coronavirus from molecular mechanisms to clinical epidemiology. Staff in the building were focused on maintenance of the building and animal colonies, and the provision of testing for hospitals and care homes in the local area with capacity for 2000 tests per day. Testing of staff would also be implemented as part of the Crick's recovery plan, with appropriate consenting arrangements in place. A COVID-19 research strategy had been developed and around 12 of the Institute's laboratories were carrying out research focused on COVID-19, covering longitudinal surveys of healthcare staff, serological studies and purification of proteins which were being made available for immunological studies. The institute was also working closely with government to influence policy on testing, recognising the challenges of workflow and the need for proper sample and IT control of large scale testing. The Crick's charity partners were facing significant financial pressures which would impact upon the Crick's finances and plans to move commercial tenants into the building had been suspended, which also carried financial impacts. It was likely that financial contributions from university partners would also be affected, but it was difficult to quantify these at this time.

Questions were raised about the Crick's 6+6 employment model and consistency of support for early career researchers transitioning to senior leadership positions outside the Crick. Sir Paul confirmed that the Francis Crick Institute was a UK resource supporting the biomedical research endeavour and it would stick to its strategy to train and support early career researchers who would make the transition to research leadership positions at other institutions, and not to retain researchers at the Crick. Researchers were encouraged and supported to secure external grant funding to build their research programmes and groups, and to position themselves for leadership roles at other Research Organisations. Members enquired about the Crick's recruitment strategy for senior leaders and the longer term aim for balance of junior and senior group leaders. Sir Paul confirmed that many junior appointments had been made, with around 50% of appointments made to women. The aim was for around 60-65% of group leaders at the Crick to be junior researchers. Programmatic strategy was set by the people recruited rather than targeted recruitment within specific areas

Council noted that disruption faced by the Crick due to the coronavirus pandemic could affect preparations for its 2021/22 QQR.

8. MRC Risk Review and Delivery Plan Risk Mapping

Toni-Jo Henderson, MRC Risk Business Partner, presented the MRC Corporate Risk Register and informed Council that two Official Development Assistance risks have been closed: one was a duplication, the other is now being managed by the UKRI International Development team. A new risk on LMS building project delays, due to coronavirus pandemic, had been added to the Corporate Risk Register and two new COVID-19 risks covering Operations and Strategy mid-long term risks were drafted and were due to be ratified by MRC's Management Board shortly. The progress of the Strategic Delivery Plan Risk Mapping exercise was being monitored by UKRI's Director of Risk and Assurance. Six risks had been mapped against Short Term Actions and are recorded on MRC's Strategy Risk Register ready for reporting as and when required by UKRI Executive Committee. The next step is to agree a timeline to complete the same exercise for the Long Term Actions.

Council noted the update and Mr Murley questioned when the MRC Head Office move would take place. With current uncertainties due to the coronavirus pandemic, timescales for the office move were still to be confirmed.

9. MRC Millennium Medal

Kate Aylett presented Council with a proposal to relaunch the MRC Millennium Medal. MRC's Strategy Board had made recommendations for changes to the process and criteria for the scheme. Higher Educational Institutions (HEIs) and Independent Research Organisations (IROs) should be asked to nominate candidates for the award, when this has been done previously by MRC Head Office staff. Strategy Board would select the winner and oversee the scheme, but the award would be formally bestowed by Council as the MRC's governing body. Previous Medals had been perceived as a 'lifetime achievement award' and Strategy Board was keen to expand the criteria for selection to recognise those at earlier stages of their career who were making significant contributions to their research field.

Council approved the principles and process for relaunching the medal and agreed this would present a good opportunity to promote the outstanding work of MRC funded researchers and increase visibility for the MRC. Members agreed the criteria for nominations should be revised to align with the principles of the San Francisco Declaration on Research Assessment (DORA) and expanded to recognise those at earlier stages of their career who were making significant contributions to their research field, and also to those making contributions broader than their own field, such as contributions to improving research culture. Members requested the revised criteria for nomination and selection be circulated for approval before the competition launch.

10. Review of Council Objectives for 2018/19 and Proposed Council Objectives for 2019/20

Dr Frances Rawle, Director of Policy, Ethics and Governance, presented Council with a summary of its self-assessment of effectiveness, progress against Council objectives set for 2019/20 and proposed objectives for 2020/21. It was proposed that for 2020/21, objective five should be split into two separate objectives to oversee MRC's Centre and Unit Portfolio Review and the QQR Review, and that an additional objective to oversee the development and delivery of the MRC Mouse Genetics Network should be added.

Council discussed increasing engagement with other constituent Councils of UKRI and exploring how Councils might best work together to develop new and existing partnerships. Members were supportive of increased engagement and agreed that for any engagement to be effective it would be important to focus the session around a theme or topic of mutual interest, to allow plenty of time for feedback from discussions and follow up for implementation plans, and to limit the number of attendees to those with specific expertise and interest to the topic under discussion.

Final Council objectives for 2020/21 would be circulated for approval, and members agreed that executive summaries for long papers should be introduced. The secretariat would proceed with plans for Council to Council engagement later in the year.

11. Executive Chair Objectives for 2020

The MRC's Executive chair, Professor Watt, set out her objectives for 2020 which included ensuring the smooth launch of the MRC's Precision Medicine Accelerator, completion of the MRC's Unit and Centre portfolio review and increased engagement with other constituent Councils of UKRI to discuss and explore respective roles in delivering the UKRI mission, and how Councils might best work together and develop new and existing partnerships. Professor Watt highlighted how there had been considerable change in staffing over the last year which needed time to bed down, and that she would be working to ensure new members of staff were well integrated into existing team structures. Positive outcomes from the current coronavirus pandemic such as process efficiencies, remote working and increased flexibility, would be adopted into future ways of working.

12. Updates from the Executive

Members noted the Update from the Executive.

13. Draft Agenda for the next Council meeting

Members noted the draft agenda for the July Council meeting. Given the current pandemic meeting arrangements and agenda items were subject to change.

14. AOB

No items were raised.