

# MEDICAL RESEARCH COUNCIL



03

Trade Union Access: in part

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## Minutes of the Council Business meeting, held via zoom videoconference, on 10 July 2020

<b>Attendees</b>		
<b>MRC Council</b>	<b>Management Board</b>	<b>MRC Head Office</b>
Fiona Watt	Rob Buckle	Rachel Benny
John Brown (left at 12:00)	Patrick Chinnery	Simone Bryan
Kim Graham	Hugh Dunlop	Becky Smith
Roger Highfield	Frances Rawle	
Precious Lunga	Susan Simon	
Richard Murley	Glenn Wells	
Jill Pell		
Munir Pirmohamed		
Eleanor Riley	<b>Apologies</b>	<b>Guests</b>
Graham Spittle	Emma Lindsell	Joanna Latimer (item 7)
Irene Tracey	Charlotte Watts	Katrina Nevin-Ridley (item 8)
Pauline Williams		Mark Pitman (item 6)
Louise Wood		Richard Smith (item 10)

### 1. Welcome and Apologies

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

Mr Richard Murley welcomed everyone to the meeting. Apologies were received from Professors John Iredale, Charlotte Watts and Patrick Chinnery.

There was no UKRI senior observer in attendance.

### 2. Register of declared interests

Mr Murley thanked members for completing the annual update to their declarations of interest and asked members to send any updated declarations to the secretariat. Sir Munir Pirmohammed declared a new interest which has been added to the register.

### **3. Minutes of the Council business meeting held on 3 March 2020**

The minutes of the Council business meeting on 7 May 2020 were approved as an accurate record of the meeting.

Mr Murley informed members that the action from the last meeting to update the selection criteria for the Millennium Medal had been completed.

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

Members noted the quarterly operations dashboard update.

### **4. Finance Report**

Mr Hugh Dunlop, MRC Chief Finance and Operating Officer updated Council on the 2020/21 operating budget, the COVID-19 impact on capital projects and the year to date result to end of May 2020. UKRI had received an allocation from BEIS for 2020/21, however, given the emerging impacts of COVID-19 on financial plans, the UKRI Executive Committee had delayed their advice to BEIS on Council level allocations. Later phased planning may see the need for UKRI to adjust Council allocations mid-year, depending on the financial position and further decisions on policy interventions. The impact of lockdown and social distancing measures could result in slippage and cost increases on capital projects and procurement of equipment; however, the full impact on the sector was still to crystallise. MRC remained in discussion with key partners and Institutes, and UKRI was seeking to utilise underspends to cover additional pressures including the impact of COVID-19. Late start dates of awarded research grants were building pressure on 2021/22 budget with a forecast of £13m. Commercial income had reduced due to global downturn and PhD extensions, shortfalls in charity co-funding and increasing demand for response mode funding were also creating additional pressures on the budget, which would impact into the next financial year and beyond.

Council raised questions about the financial modelling of impacts on the budget, including pressures on charity co-funding and demands for response mode funding, and how MRC was working with UKRI to support the charity sector. It was confirmed that MRC was working to address the charity shortfall with a focus on strategic investments where it was easier to identify the potential shortfall, such as the UK Dementia Research Institute. Members suggested it would be useful for Council to send a letter to the UKRI board highlighting the significant financial risk to MRC's key strategic investments funded in partnership with medical research charities. There had been an increase in demand for response mode funding across all Research Councils and it was suggested that reasons for this included the response to increased financial uncertainty faced by the university sector and as researchers were spending less time in the lab, there was more time available to write funding proposals. It was noted that an increase in demand for response mode funding would impact on award rates. Financial modelling of impacts on the budget would be presented to Council at their meeting in October.

### **5. COVID-19 Business Continuity Update**

Professor Fiona Watt, MRC Chief Executive and Mr Dunlop updated Council on MRC's COVID-19 Business Continuity activity.

Professor Watt acknowledged the excellent work that had been done to enable the rapid delivery of research funding, highlighting how this had placed considerable strain on Head Office staff, and how the lack of visibility of MRC's contribution in communications about the important work it is delivering to tackle the COVID-19 pandemic had negatively affected staff morale. Inequalities highlighted by the pandemic and the Black Lives Matter Movement had prompted discussions about the diversity of staff at Head Office and what MRC could do to promote inclusivity in the opportunities it offers to staff.

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Mr Dunlop updated Council on planned recruitment for 12 new fixed term appointments to Head Office to ease pressure on existing staff delivering MRC's response to COVID-19 activities. Swindon Head Office was reopening to accommodate up to 40 staff in July. This was aimed at staff unable to continue to work from home due to equipment, connection or wellbeing issues. The plan to move MRC Head Office London staff to the new We Works building had been paused but IT contractors could start work again in July to prepare for reopening. All MRC Institutes had 20-25% of staff working on site with appropriate social distancing in place. The Mary Lyon Centre was losing about 15-20% of staff time due to special leave largely due to caring responsibilities of continued day care and school closures and the return of partners to work. The MRC Laboratory of Molecular Biology (LMB) had ambitions from this week to move to 100% occupancy of the labs through a rota system. Restrictions on office and desk occupancies had been applied and all staff were required to wear face coverings and adhere to social distancing rules. Group meetings and larger gatherings would remain online. It was confirmed that UKRI policy for returning to the office would apply for Head Office staff, whereas MRC Institutes' plans for recovery would be managed as local circumstances dictate.

Members commented that plans for recovery should also have a focus on reducing the organisation's carbon footprint and should adopt the positive aspects of lockdown into new ways of working, for example more flexible working. It was confirmed that MRC was undertaking a lessons learned exercise to understand the impact of the pandemic on staff and capture positive outcomes that can be adopted in future processes and ways of working. It was agreed that this would be presented to Council at its October meeting. Questions were asked about the management of animal colonies during the lockdown and to what extent additional culling of animals had been necessary. It was confirmed that a reduction in animal numbers had mainly been managed by reduction or termination of breeding programmes, but that information relating to the culling of animals would be provided by e-mail. MRC was currently gathering information in order to respond to a Freedom of Information request about this issue. Members also asked for further information about the impact of the pandemic on female staff and MRC's response to the Black Lives Matter movement. It was agreed that updates on these issues would be presented at the next Council meeting.

### **6. Review of MRC's Quinquennial Review Process**

Dr Mark Pitman, Head of Science Performance and Reviews, introduced this item which presented Council with an update on the review of MRC's quinquennial review (QQR) process. The review had been initiated to respond to concerns that the process was too long, reports were too lengthy and guidance overly verbose. Following a review of the practices of other funders, consideration of a call from government to address administrative bureaucracy, and consultation with a broad cross section of stakeholders, eight areas were identified where there was potential for improving and streamlining the QQR process. At the joint meeting of Strategy Board and Council in December 2019, these areas were presented and approved for further investigation. The Office had since undertaken further consultation to seek views on how recommendations might be implemented. The consultation had highlighted how the process was not considered 'broken' and the MRC approach was praised for its robustness. There was general endorsement of the key recommendations to reduce the timeline and paper burden, which were considered an appropriate evolution of the process rather than a complete change. Enacting these would result in a reduction of the QQR timelines for units from 14 months to 6-7 months and institutes from 24 months to 14-15 months. Proposed changes to the structure of reports would see page reductions of more than 30%.

The LMB was keen to embrace a new approach to the QQR, in particular, one that was lighter on papers and followed a shorter timescale. To this end, the Institute had agreed that for its 2020/21 review it would pilot this new process. It had also been identified that there was opportunity to agree with other funders a core evaluation framework for large investments across the UK based on quantitative and qualitative measures. An on-line forum to discuss these opportunities would be held over 5 days from the 29 June. Outputs from this exercise would be reported to Council at a future meeting.

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Council raised questions about how this review was integrated with the MRC's unit and portfolio review presented at the joint Strategy Board and Council meeting the previous day, and how this review would address the criteria by which units and centres were assessed. Members commented that each individual investment being reviewed on its own timeline and in isolation, made it difficult to ascertain each unit and centre's strategic value and relevance.

It was confirmed that the QQR review had by design focused on reducing the timeline and administration of the review process, whereas the unit and centre portfolio review (discussed at the joint meeting with Strategy Board the previous day) focused on the balance of Unit and Centre investments and their fit to future investment opportunities and needs. The unit and centre review had recommended that MRC's portfolio played more of a role in providing national research capability.

Council approved the recommended changes to the QQR process and agreed that proposals for the next steps following the Unit and Centre portfolio review should be presented at a future meeting.

### **7. Establishment Review of the UK Dementia Research Institute (UK DRI)**

Dr Joanna Latimer, Head of Neurosciences and Mental Health Board, introduced this item and presented Council with the outcome of the Establishment Review (ER) of the UK Dementia Research Institute (UK DRI). The ER was initiated in 2019 to provide support and feedback to the UK DRI, the UK DRI Ltd Board, as well as assurance to the Founders (the MRC, Alzheimer's Society, Alzheimer's Research UK) that the set-up, governance structures (management systems and operational structures) and strategic direction of the UK DRI were progressing as expected, and in accordance with the Founders' expectations. A Quinquennial Review addressing all aspects of the UK DRI including research strategy, scientific quality and progress, funding, organisation and partnerships was scheduled for 2022/23. The ER Panel had commended the Director for the achievement to date in beginning to establish a complex Institute and was satisfied by the progress made towards achieving its mission. A number of recommendations had been made by the ER panel. The Founders agreed that good progress had been made and that further detail provided in a revised response to the ER Panel Recommendations provided some reassurance that the UK DRI was establishing the appropriate operational and organisational structures.

Council asked questions about how the COVID-19 crisis had impacted the finances of the DRI's charity partners.

Council noted the outcomes of the Establishment Review and asked to be kept informed of the financial position.

### **8. UKRI Communications Strategy Update**

Katrina Nevin-Ridley, UKRI Director of External Relations, Communications and Public Engagement, updated Council on activity of the UKRI communications team in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. It was highlighted that in some cases announcements were made by government, meaning that UKRI had little control over how and when they were made. UKRI was working with partners at the National Institute for Health Research and the Science Media Centre to promote UKRI funded research once announcements by government had been made. A new suite of webpages had been created to provide a single resource of information on UKRI's response to the pandemic as well as short YouTube videos, case studies and use of UKRI's social media channels to promote UKRI and Council-led work. The MRC-specific films on vaccines, antibody tests, and research into infectious diseases had achieved a total of 18,574 views and were some of the most popular videos to date. The overall aim was to provide richer digital content and more information about how UKRI's rapid response had been underpinned by long term funding.

While members acknowledged that in some cases UKRI had little control over how and when announcements were made, they expressed disappointment that there was little visibility of MRC's

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contribution to the national effort to tackle the COVID-19 pandemic and commented on the need for more MRC spokespeople in the media. Working with partners at the National Institute for Health Research and the Science Media Centre would be important for increasing MRC's visibility. It was noted that quotes from Professor Watt, MRC's Executive Chair, had been provided for various new stories but members emphasised there was still a need for the UKRI press office to brief academics in receipt of MRC funding to reference their funding source / affiliation with MRC when speaking in the media. Council welcomed the launch of a single resource of information on UKRI's response to the pandemic and questions were raised about the target audience. Members commented on the content of the new webpages, suggesting ways that dwell time could be increased, for example through the use of human interest stories.

Members commented that more detailed information on the COVID-19 research already funded was needed for researchers developing proposals and it was agreed that this would be addressed by the UKRI communications team.

### **9. MRC Stakeholder Engagement**

Professor Watt outlined plans for MRC stakeholder engagement,. A new team had been created to deliver stakeholder engagement activities and work had already started on The Max Perutz writing competition and the MRC Millennium Medal. Consideration was being given to co-developing a strong and coherent national identity for the MRC's network of Units and Centres and their researchers. There were plans for annual events for MRC funded PhD students and post-doctoral researchers, and for generating content for a monthly newsletter highlighting MRC funding opportunities and advice to applicants, and plans were underway for working with MRC funded researchers to generate science and policy content for MRC channels including twitter, linked-in and other social media.

Council welcomed the plans to promote MRC's work and increase its visibility, which would they hoped would have a positive impact on staff morale. Members agreed that it was important to create a brand identity for MRC units and institutes, especially when researchers were speaking in the media. Members suggested working more closely with the Science Media Centre to increase media engagement identify MRC spokespeople, and where appropriate, take opportunities to provide opinion pieces in national newspapers.

### **10. Safety, Security and Resilience Annual Report**

Richard Smith, MRC Health and Safety Advisor, updated Council on the annual safety, security and resilience report. There was a higher level of incidents reported from MRC Harwell compared with LMB and the London Institute of Medical Sciences (LMS). The data demonstrated a good level of near miss reporting, significantly higher than in the previous three quarters, assumed to be due to the launch of the new reporting system SHE-Assure, which should help to reduce the number of accidents and incidents occurring. Continued improvements in Health and Safety standards and competencies were being monitored across all the MRC Institutes in order to reduce the number of accidents and incidents. A benchmarking exercise had been undertaken to review all aspects of the Health and Safety systems and supportive arrangements against the requirements of the MRC Health and Safety Plan 2019-2025.

Council noted the annual Safety Security and Resilience report and endorsed the establishment of targets for Health and Safety performance and increased training activities to address the causes for the majority of injuries. Members asked what steps could be taken to embed a health and safety culture within MRC Institutes. Visibility of Health and Safety officers was important for promoting trust and a culture of reporting near misses. The introduction of QR codes to replace the paperwork burden had also made a positive contribution towards embedding a health and safety culture. Health and safety culture was reviewed as part of the benchmarking exercise and annual targets would be set to improve the safety culture of MRC Institutes and Head Office from good to excellent.

## **11. MRC Estates Plan**

This item was discussed after item seven.

Dr Susan Simon introduced this item and provided Council with an overview of the MRC Estates Plan 2020 – 2025. The plan had been amended to take account of new incoming UKRI policies, such as the Environmental Sustainability Policy, and the impact of COVID-19, which was considered to be significant on estates planning and operation. Whilst Institutes and Head Office had proven resilience during the pandemic, the new requirements of a safe working environment posed real challenges for the reopening and the future space planning. In consultation with the Institutes the MRC Estates team identified a number of key aspects, which need to be viewed differently as part of future estates planning in the wake of the pandemic. A workshop with MRC Institutes was planned to capture the lessons learned and establish clearly defined tasks for implementation. This would also result in a review and revision of the Research and Business Continuity Plans in MRC Institutes and Head Office.

The Estates Plan 2020- 2025 focused on five activities; COVID-19 impact and recovery, Maintenance and Capital Replacement, Facility Maintenance (FM) Services, Capital Projects and Environmental Sustainability. Challenges included: decreasing funds or reduced flexibility in capital expenditure by more elements being ringfenced. This resulted in the MRC Institutes having no free allocation of capital and requiring Institutes to bid for every planned expenditure over the value of £10,000 ranging from scientific equipment to plant replacement in the estate. Recent surveys of HEIs had indicated willingness to share facilities. Approval from BEIS for procurement of all FM services outside existing government frameworks was being sought. There were plans to achieve exemption from the FM services process through negotiations with the Cabinet Office.

UKRI had approved its Environmental Sustainability policy establishing a target for the organisation to achieve a carbon neutral status by 2040 and Councils were expected to develop plans for their contribution to this target. MRC Estates had commissioned a consultancy to support MRC in the development of an action plan that was expected to be submitted to UKRI by end of this Financial Year.

Questions were asked about the impact of the pandemic on universities' plans for new buildings. It was confirmed that most universities were pausing capital projects but had highlighted the continued requirement for their own specialist facilities. The MRC Estates team was looking at running and maintenance costs with a view to encouraging sharing of facilities, which would increase efficiencies and reduce carbon emissions.

Council commented on the need for shared facilities for national capability and asked about the extent to which the estates plan recognised the shift to home working and whether the move to the WeWork offices would take place given the government advice to work from home. It was confirmed that the WeWork offices had meeting room space which would be needed in the future. Council highlighted it would be important to ensure the provision of adequate videoconferencing facilities, especially as it was likely that plans for a sustainable recovery would include greater use of virtual meetings. New patterns of working were still emerging, but it was anticipated that within the Estates Plan there would be some shift in investment towards provision for staff working from home.

Council approved the Estates Plan 2020-2025.

## **12. Outcome of the QQR of the MRC Lifecourse Epidemiology Unit**

Dr Buckle presented Council with the outcome of the QQR of the Lifecourse Epidemiology Unit (LEU). The three programmes in the musculoskeletal health theme were recognised as being globally leading and nationally important and were strongly supported by the Review Subcommittee in recognition of their demonstrable high impact on research publication, clinical practice, and policy. However, given the reduced scale of activity to be supported, continuing the unit structure going forward was not seen to be viable. Instead, transition to a centre model, focussing on the demonstrable strengths of the

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current unit, was recommended. Critical to this, it had been agreed that in partnership with the University of Southampton, a senior international leader would be recruited to succeed the current director, who was planning to retire. The recommendations of the visiting subcommittee had been considered by the Population and Systems Medicine Board and MRC's Management Board.

Questions were asked about the number of staff affected by the transition and succession plans for a Director for the new Centre. The current Director would manage the transition to a centre, and it was expected that the new Director, once recruited, would take up the post with their own grant support in place. If the new Director was relocating to the UK to take up the appointment then some transition funding may be necessary.

Council approved the outcome of the QQR and endorsed Management Board's recommendation that the LEU should transition from a Unit into a Centre focussed on musculoskeletal health.

Following the meeting, a correction regarding the timing of the transitional support package was circulated to members.

### **13. Any Other Business**

Dr Graham Spittle highlighted that HDRUK had been awarded a grant from the COVID-19 Therapeutics Accelerator to establish a new International Data Research Alliance and data analysis Workbench to support the rapid development of insights and treatments to combat the global effects of COVID-19. It was agreed that MRC should aim to publish a blog about the new partnership.

Professor Eleanor Riley highlighted that the recent gender pay gap report published by UKRI showed the mean gender pay gap had increased since the 2018 report. It would be important to conduct further analysis of the data to understand in more detail the drivers behind the gender pay gap and the resulting plan of action. It was agreed that a further update would be provided at the next meeting in October.

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

#### **14. Freedom of Information Annual Report**

Council noted the annual update.

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

Council noted the update from the Executive and the Executive Chair highlighted that MRC had recently funded a new MRC/NIHR initiative for progressing Myalgic encephalomyelitis/chronic fatigue syndrome (ME/CFS) research called 'DecodeME'. The proposal had been developed with iteration between relevant stakeholders - researchers, clinicians and Patient representatives. The study would build a re-contactable research cohort of 20,000 people – a first major platform of this scale on ME/CFS in the UK, with an objective to reveal causal biomolecular mechanisms of ME/CFS and to create focused opportunities for development of diagnostic tests and targeted treatments.

#### **16. Draft Agenda for the October Meeting**

Council noted the draft agenda for the October business meeting.