

MEDICAL RESEARCH COUNCIL



03A

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

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Minutes of the Council meeting held at the Francis Crick Institute on 10 December 2018

Present:

Council	Head Office staff
Professor Fiona Watt (Executive Chair)	Dr Rob Buckle
Dr John Brown	Mr Hugh Dunlop
Dr Roger Highfield	Dr Louise Leong
Mr Richard Murley	Dr Declan Mulkeen (via teleconference)
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 (items 1-7)
UKRI Observer	Dr Jill Jones (item 6)
Dr Rebecca Endean	Dr Jane Luff (item 8)
	Ms Carole Walker (item 9)
Apologies	Ms Toni-Jo Henderson (item 9)
Professor John Iredale	
Dr Mene Pangalos	
Professor Charlotte Watts	
Dr Pauline Williams	

1. Welcome and introductions

Professor Watt welcomed everyone to the meeting and introduced Dr Rebecca Endean, Director of Strategy as the UKRI observer and Simone Bryan who would be managing the MRC Council Secretariat from January 2019.

Apologies had been received from Professors Iredale, Watts and Williams and Dr Mene Pangalos.

2. Register of declared interests

Professor Watt requested that members inform the secretariat of any updates to their declarations of interest.

3. Minutes of the Council meeting held on 19 October 2018

The minutes were approved as an accurate record.

4. Roles and responsibilities of Councils

Professor Watt introduced this item which related to the circulation of a letter which had been sent to Council members by Sir Mark Walport with the aim of clarifying the roles and responsibilities of Council and emphasising its decision-making role. Professor Watt asked Mr Murley to lead the discussion.

Mr Murley welcomed the letter, however he considered that the distribution of responsibility between the Council and the Executive Chair was still not entirely clear. He referred members to the information contained within the letter regarding delegation and, specifically, to the responsibility of Council to hold the Executive Chair to account. Mr Murley suggested that it would be helpful to establish a coherent approach across UKRI to determine how this responsibility should be delivered and that a set of generic UKRI objectives might be agreed to which Council-specific objectives could be added.

Professor Watt suggested that any metrics to assess performance should be based on MRC priorities over the next five years and be aligned with the Strategic Delivery Plan. It was suggested that the upcoming reviews of both the centres of excellence and senior fellowship schemes might be included in the agreed objectives. Mr Murley reiterated Sir Mark's message from the joint meeting where he advised that we buy knowledge and emphasised the importance of ensuring money is well spent and suggested that our objectives should focus on output, outcome and impact.

It was agreed that a paper would be produced for further discussion and that Professor Watt would also consider what she expected of the Council when setting the objectives.

Members agreed that there was still some overlap between the remit of Council and that of Strategy Board and it was suggested that this be better articulated, for instance by establishing terms of reference. It was agreed that a paper on the relative roles of Council and Strategy Board would be discussed at the next meeting.

5. Finance report

Mr Dunlop provided an update on the medium-term financial outlook and recommended 2019/20 commitment budget as well as the forecast outturn. With regard to the year-to-date results to the end of October 2018, programme resource expenditure was £0.1m higher than forecast and £5.9m (1.9 per cent) higher than budget; administration expenditure was £0.6m (6.2 per cent) lower than forecast and £1.2m (12.3 per cent) lower than budget and capital expenditure was £2.1m higher than budget due to the timing of contingency expenditure which has been utilised for the Biobank Imaging Centre.

Mr Dunlop explained that the medium-term outlook models future new award spend against available headroom, that is the difference between future available funding and existing commitments, and indicates finances over a medium range of five years. Mr Dunlop explained that there would be forecasted budget deficits in future years particularly in 2019/20 due to the slippage from 2017/18 of spend on UK Biobank Whole Genome sequencing.

Members queried whether there was any update on the charitable status of UKRI and were informed that a resolution continued to be sought by UKRI.

Members raised the issue of whether there had been any progress on the issue of open access overspend and Mr Dunlop confirmed that the option to use existing grant funds had been fed into the UKRI open access review.

6. Global health update

Ms Jones, Head of Global Health Strategy, introduced this item to provide Council with an update on recent discussions by the Global Health Group (GHG) on the MRC's global health strategy which would form part of the Strategic Delivery Plan. Ms Jones explained that the MRC worked in partnership with many other funders including Wellcome, the Department for International Development (DFID) and the UK Department for Health and Social Care (DHSC) to support research across many disease areas.

Ms Jones reported that a review by the GHG in 2016 had concluded that diversification and a multi-sector approach was required. In preparation for the revised Strategic Delivery Plan, GHG had discussed a refresh to the strategy in consultation with external stakeholders across the UK and overseas. One of the strongest messages from the consultation was the importance of sustainable capacity building, working in partnership with Low and Middle Income Countries (LMICs) to ensure the funding of relevant research and to increase engagement with LMIC researchers.

Members welcomed the increased diversification and awareness of the growing burden of non-communicable diseases (NCDs) and enquired whether there were any targets to increase funding in this area.

Ms Jones explained that targets would be set and revised objectives for Global Health would form part of the Strategic Delivery Plan. It was acknowledged, however, that funding for infections would remain at a high level.

Members commented that the benefits to the UK of global research was not sufficiently highlighted and discussed the difficulties of building research capacity in LMICs and the importance of working closely with these countries to agree priorities for funding.

Discussion centred on how we might measure the success of global health funding and it was agreed that any funding should be subject to the same rigour as UK funding within the principles of overseas aid. Ms Jones explained that panel member applications from researchers in LMICs were encouraged so that they were involved in the decision-making process. She provided the example of the mental health call in South Africa funded by the Newton fund where the MRC were involved in setting the agenda which could work as a good model for working with LMICs. Ms Jones explained that the MRC was looking to build partnerships with LMICs rather than asking for matched funding.

Professor Watt highlighted the excellent work being done by Dr Peter Dukes and Tumani Corrah to mentor outstanding African scientists and in establishing the Africa Research Excellence Fund (AREF).

7. Spending review outlook

Dr Mulkeen introduced this item which followed on from discussions at the October Council meeting. 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 only be agreed up to 2020/21. Dr Endean highlighted the potential impact of the Augur review which would potentially reduce university fees and the importance of engaging with Treasury on this issue. Dr Endean also emphasised the importance of building the strongest possible case to Government in the Spending Review submissions.

Members enquired whether the allocations to individual research councils might be different to previous allocations. Dr Endean explained that, in previous spending reviews, the councils with the largest funding allocations were those with successful ODA or ISCF bids and explained that, if UKRI were successful in securing additional response mode funding, decisions would be made at UKRI level on where this should be allocated.

8. Infrastructure roadmap

Dr Jane Luff introduced this item and explained that Council were being asked to consider the progress and next steps for the UKRI Roadmap and advise on any further action to be taken. BEIS had requested that a UKRI roadmap be produced with the intention of providing an overview of current capability across the UK and setting out the priorities over the next ten years. The roadmap report is expected to be finalised in Spring 2019 and a draft of the interim progress report had been provided to Council in advance (08 annex 4).

Professor Watt emphasised the importance of community engagement in producing the roadmap and asked Ms Luff to confirm that sufficient consultation had taken place. Ms Luff advised that stakeholder surveys had been circulated, regional workshops held and views sought from the top 20 universities (measured by research funding). There had also been engagement with the charity sector and Ms Luff explained that there would be further opportunity to comment once the report was published. Dr Wood advised members that her team had also worked closely with Ms Luff and offered further assistance in engaging with NHS England if required.

Dr Spittle suggested that it would be helpful to invite an IT representative to join the e-infrastructure group which Ms Luff agreed to feed back.

In addition to the UKRI roadmap, Ms Luff also informed members of the intention to produce an MRC internal roadmap and explained that they were looking at areas for underpinning new areas of science.

Members queried how universities managed their mid-scale equipment requirements and suggested that universities be encouraged to think collectively of ways in which to address future requirements given the limited funding available.

9. Risk update: developments under UKRI

Ms Walker introduced this item and reminded members that she had attended the meeting held in July prior to the announcement of her position as the Head of Risk and Counter Fraud, UKRI and provided an update on arrangements regarding risk under UKRI.

Since assuming her UKRI role, Ms Walker has been appointing business partners across the organisation and introduced Ms Toni-Jo Henderson as the new MRC Business Partner for risk and assurance and lead on international risk for UKRI.

Ms Walker informed members that it had been agreed to use the EasyRisk risk management system across UKRI and that all councils would migrate on to the system by the end of March 2019. Staff training would be provided across UKRI with minimal change expected for the MRC.

10. 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.

Professor Watt informed Council of the sad news that Professor Sir David Weatherall, founding Director of the MRC Weatherall Institute of Molecular Medicine had passed away. An obituary would be included in the updates paper for the March meeting.

Professor Watt advised that she hoped to be able to announce the appointment of the new Clinical Research Director for the MRC soon. She also informed members that a review of the Crick had been held recently which had been positive with some recommendations made and a full report on the review would be provided at the next meeting.

11. Draft agenda for the next meeting

Council noted the draft agenda for the March meeting and that the meeting would take place at the Laboratory of Molecular Biology, Cambridge and would include presentations from local Directors as well as an optional tour of the LMB.

12. Any other business and close

No other business was raised.