

# MEDICAL RESEARCH COUNCIL



03

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## Minutes of the Council meeting held at 58 Victoria Embankment on 17 October 2019

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### Present:

<b>Council</b>	<b>Head Office staff</b>
Professor Fiona Watt (Executive Chair)	Ms Rachel Benny
Dr Roger Highfield	Ms Simone Bryan
Professor John Iredale	Dr Rob Buckle
Mr Richard Murley	Professor Patrick Chinnery
Professor Jill Pell	Mr Hugh Dunlop
Professor Sir Munir Pirmohamed	Dr Declan Mulkeen
Professor Eleanor Riley	Dr Frances Rawle
Dr Graham Spittle	Dr Susan Simon
Professor Irene Tracey	
Dr Pauline Williams (via telephone)	
Dr Louise Wood	
	<b>Guests</b>
<b>UKRI Observers</b>	Lisa Dinh (item 5)
Mike Blackburn	Sarah Collinge (Item 8)
Isobel Stephen	Toni-Jo Henderson (Item 7)
	Dr Louise Jones (item 10)
<b>Apologies</b>	Jill Jones (item 9)
John Brown	Professor Catherine Law (item 9)
Mene Pangalos	Dr Ian Viney (item 10)
Charlotte Watts	

### 1. Welcome and introductions

Professor Fiona Watt welcomed everyone to the meeting and introduced Isobel Stephen and Mike Blackburn, as the senior UKRI observers. Professor Watt welcomed Rachel Benny who was joining the Council Secretariat as the Governance Manager. Professor Watt also noted that this meeting was the last Dr Declan Mulkeen would be attending after 31 years at MRC and that his experience and insights would be greatly missed.

## **OFFICIAL SENSITIVE**

Apologies had been received from John Brown, Mene Pangalos and Charlotte Watts. Dr Pauline Williams joined the meeting via telephone.

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

Professor Watt thanked members for completing the annual update to their declarations of interest and asked those members who had not already done so to return their updated declarations to the secretariat.

### **3. Minutes of the joint Strategy Board and Council meeting held on 9 July 2019**

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

#### **3b Minutes of the Council Business meeting held on 9 July 2019**

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

#### **3c. Health and Safety plan 2019 – 2025**

Dr Susan Simon introduced this item and presented Council with the 2019-2025 health and safety plan. Council noted and approved the plan.

#### **3d. Quarterly dashboards and annual report**

Simone Bryan introduced this item. At its meeting in May, Council had discussed two key reports members should receive regularly to monitor MRC operations. Example dashboards were presented to gather early views from Council on whether the types of information and data presented was useful. Council commented that the dashboards were useful and suggested further work to better understand factors affecting success rates for ethnic minority applicants. Members questioned when UKRI would publish its evidence reviews on Equality, Diversity and Inclusion, and Bullying and Harassment. It was confirmed that UKRI planned to publish its position statement and evidence review on bullying and harassment on 22 October 2019 and its review of Equality, Diversity and Inclusion in January 2020.

Members agreed that it would be useful to receive information relating to finance, risk and HR, and high-level information on the status of business-critical activities on a quarterly basis, however information relating to the monitoring of science operations and outputs would be better presented with commentary, and on an annual basis. Members suggested that sharing funding decision outcomes with reviewers could help to improve peer review response rates. It was confirmed that MRC regularly publishes its funding decision outcomes with the unique grant identifier so reviewers can identify which applications have been funded if they wish, but this information is not proactively fed back.

### **4. Finance Report**

Mr Hugh Dunlop presented Council with an update on the forecast financial outturn and the year-to-date result to the end of August 2019. Forecast expenditure was noted to be £11.9m less than budget, mainly due to underspend on Future Leader Fellows, with first and second round awards having been lower than expected. However, there had been an increase in applications to subsequent rounds and the recent appointment of new Director of Talent and Skills was expected to help improve the situation. Approximately £5m had been earmarked within the forecast to be used for in-year initiatives, such as Confidence in Concept.

## **5. UKRI Brand**

Professor Watt welcomed Lisa Dinh, UKRI branding project manager, to the meeting. Ms Dinh presented an update to Council on the recently launched UKRI brand. UKRI had worked with Dragon Rouge to develop a plan to better describe and articulate the organisation's brand. The new brand identity was aligned around the common story of "knowledge with impact" which was developed after extensive consultation. The new branding would bring together all Councils with a consistent visual identity. The next stage of the phased implementation would involve rolling out of the new brand across the various units, facilities and institutes. Mike Blackburn confirmed that UKRI communications would provide the budget and the support for project management of phase two.

Council commented on the success of the brand and welcomed the use of vibrant colours and consistency in how the name of each constituent Council of UKRI was spelled out in full. It was confirmed there would be opportunity to update the image library with pictures that were more relevant to MRC's portfolio.

## **6. Research integrity annual report and research reproducibility**

Frances Rawle introduced this item, which updated Council on the work of MRC, UKRI and others to promote research integrity and reproducibility and to follow up the recommendations of the House of Commons Science and Technology Committee Inquiry into Research Integrity. Council was informed of the new arrangements for publishing a UKRI annual statement on research integrity, the publication of the revised and plans to set up a new Research Integrity Committee in Summer 2020.

More allegations of research misconduct had been notified to the MRC in 2018/19 than in 2017/18 (19 allegations up from 10). This was attributed to increasing awareness of the need to notify allegations to Research Councils following the change in policy in 2017 and an increase in the number of e-mails from the pseudonymous "Claire Francis", drawing attention to allegations of manipulated or duplicated figures in the scientific literature. The MRC only investigates allegations where it is the employer, others were referred to the relevant Research Organisation.

It was confirmed that the MRC mandates registration of all clinical studies on the ISRCTN registry and that the recent audit had shown 100% registration on a variety of public registries (not all on ISRCTN). Members suggested the launch of MedRxiv would help facilitate the publication of negative trial results. It was noted that the MRC mandates that all clinical trial results are published and some of the registries have facilities for publication of summary trial outcomes. The Health Research Authority (HRA) had carried out a consultation on clinical trial transparency and would be bringing the conclusions to a hearing of the Science and Technology Committee at the end of the month.

Members noted that the Science and Technology Committee Chair was keen that HRA bring in system of sanctions for non-publication of trial results. Members noted the MRC's support for the UK Reproducibility Network, which was a positive development, and that the Research Boards were now regularly discussing experimental design and reproducibility issues as part of the assessment of grant applications. Members were satisfied with the controls in place to manage the reputational risk to MRC in relation to research misconduct and reproducibility.

## **7. MRC Risk Register**

Toni-Jo Henderson, UKRI Risk & Assurance Business Partner, introduced this item and presented Council with an update on the MRC corporate risk register. Ms Henderson highlighted that two risks relating to Official Development Assistance had recently been closed and that UKRI risk partners were working with Councils to develop risk monitoring processes as part of monitoring and evaluation plans for the Council Delivery Plans.

Mr Mike Blackburn informed council of the work being undertaken by UKRI on an integrated risk and assurance framework (IGRAF) and specifically, work being undertaken to set risk appetite. Constituent Councils would be asked to contribute to the development of the framework, setting risk appetites relevant to their individual sector. Members raised questions about flexibility in budgets and Mr Blackburn confirmed that UKRI had the ability to move money around to avoid underspends, but there was less flexibility for funds that were supplementary to core budgets, and that Councils could overcommit to come in on budget but could not overspend. Members asked whether risk appetite was already captured in the impact assessment. Mr Blackburn confirmed that defining different levels of risk appetite, and relating the management of risks to risk appetite would be important in demonstrating to government partners that UKRI was a maturing organisation with an appreciation of risk.

## **8. Commitment budget planning**

Mr Dunlop and Dr Sarah Collinge introduced the options for commitment budget planning approaches and the relative scale of primary budget components for financial year 2020/21. When the MRC decides to support an activity, it must commit to the resulting expenditure into the future which means that most of what the MRC will spend in the current financial year is the result of cumulative commitments made over many previous years. The difference between the funding expected and the committed expenditure is the opportunity that can be filled with new research and is called the commitment budget. The commitment budget plan provides the allocation of the available budget to each research activity, from the scale of investment in major funding streams, such as the Research Boards and Panels, through to individual initiatives. Ideally the proposed budget plan covers multiple years to ensure that funds are released in a way that the community can optimally respond to and takes into account of the need for lead-in time and medium-term planning by applicants, which argues for relatively smooth year-to-year availability of funds as opposed to abrupt changes. However, due to financial constraints and uncertainties it has in recent times only been practical to plan one year ahead, as is proposed this year in light of the stalled Government Spending Review.

An annual planning cycle was proposed where Council has three opportunities to oversee planning and provide advice; the first discussion aimed to set the relative distribution of the commitment budget at a high level (i.e. funding stream), the next discussion would move on to agree a further level of detail, advising on the scale of allocations to individual funding mechanisms for the coming year, and the final opportunity to input as the detailed commitment budget is agreed by Council in March before the start of the new financial year. Council welcomed the proposed approach and approved the planning schedule.

It was noted that the available metrics have limited potential as a decision-making tool and a variety of strategic drivers will continue to need to be considered contextually by Council to inform choices about how to scale commitment budget funding streams. Council noted that Strategy Board was the appropriate forum for initiating discussions on the relative balance of funding streams – for example the split between training, translation and the research boards - based upon its view of the science drivers and opportunities. This perspective should support the first Council discussion in the budget setting cycle, and this additional step will be included in the process for next financial year. Council considered the options for the commitment plan and noted that decisions on distribution of budget would need to reflect MRC priority areas and commented that a reduction to the research boards budget may result in the award rate becoming unacceptably low. Declan Mulkeen commented that it would be important to make plans for two funding scenarios; flat funding in real terms, and growth on a trajectory towards the 2.4 per cent GDP target.

Members commented that it was difficult to make decisions on the scale of allocations to individual funding mechanisms without information on MRC's wider portfolio, including the large investments. Members requested that further information on the MRC's wider portfolio, including funds that are supplementary to the core budget, and information on the MRC's scheme of delegation, be presented at the next meeting in addition to the information on core funding streams. A paper

setting out options for the balance of funding across different funding streams, including the further information requested, will be prepared for the December meeting.

## **9. Global Health Research Board**

Ms Jill Jones and Professor Catherine Law introduced this item which presented Council with plans for a new Research Board in Applied Global Health. The plans had been discussed and agreed at MRC's Strategy Board in September. Almost one fifth of MRC-supported research is oriented to global health. At present, these commitments are made through a wide variety of routes including MRC Boards and Panels, international partnerships, joint-funding, ad hoc strategic schemes and wider Official Development Assistance (ODA) activity. The main objective for establishing a new Board for global health is to move away from ad hoc strategic schemes and to create a response-mode mechanism that provides predictable, repeated and consistent opportunities for researchers from the UK and Low and Middle-Income Countries (LMICs) in applied global health research, support for global health research capacity building, and to develop cross sectoral and interdisciplinary research. Predictable and consistent opportunities for researchers should support an increase in the quality of applications, as this allows a longer lead in time for researchers to prepare and submit applications.

Members questioned the overlap of remit with other boards and whether oversight of the MRC unit The Gambia at London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine (LSHTM), and the MRC/UVRI and LSHTM Uganda research unit would remain with the MRC's Infection and Immunity Board (IIB). It was confirmed that oversight of MRC's units in Africa would remain with IIB, and that budgets for the other research boards would not be affected by the establishment of the new board in applied global health. Members commented on the need to increase discovery research in LMICs and highlighted the importance of high-quality feedback to applicants, networking for principal investigators and coordinated training for supporting capacity building.

Council was strongly supportive of the proposed principles, remit and operational arrangements and approved the establishment of the new Board for Applied Global Health Research, which would aim to make its first funding awards during financial year 2020/21. Members raised a number of areas for further consideration, including ensuring robust assurance and financial controls are implemented, industry representation in board membership, and pre-submission advice to drive up quality of applications. Council requested a report on progress once the new Board had been set up and run its first funding round.

## **10. MRC Translational Research 2008-18 Evaluation Report – Next Steps**

Ian Viney and Louise Jones introduced this item and invited Council to discuss the top-level opportunities highlighted in the evaluation report of MRC Translational Research 2008 – 2018, which had been published in September. The evaluation was commissioned by MRC Translational Research Group and conducted by the MRC Evaluation and Analysis Team, Ipsos MORI and Technopolis group, with oversight from an independent expert advisory group. The expert advisory group focused on three areas; contrasting the results of the directed portfolio with the results from other funding mechanisms, setting MRC's translational research in the context of the international landscape and examining whether analysis of the progress of projects identify determinants of performance. One of the key objectives was to understand whether projects had moved along the translational pathway. The review determined that 60 percent of projects moved along the translational pathway within the lifetime of the project and 36 percent of projects funded through the Developmental Pathway Funding Scheme had progressed to a stage beyond MRC's remit in the period evaluated. Eighteen per cent of projects reached a definitive dead end, in most cases due to scientific or technical problems. Around half of the MRC's directed portfolio supported projects with either a broader remit than just product development, or work that developed new research tools or methodologies to support translation. More work could be done using this data to explore the different levels of ambition that initiatives had taken and what factors played a role in successful

outcomes. A highlight of the work was the outstanding commercial outcomes from MRC's managed translational schemes which had resulted in the establishment of spin out companies currently valued at £2.7 billion, and this part of the analyses had been developed into a brief publication "Bridging the Gap" for circulation to stakeholders at MRC events. The overall evaluation had delivered a clear evidence base on which to explore the future opportunities for MRC investment into and support of academic translational research.

Council welcomed the report and noted the key role MRC had played in strengthening the UK translational research environment. Members advised that a concise summary of results would be helpful and commented that it would be useful to undertake similar large-scale evaluations of other areas of MRC's portfolio. Dr Louise Wood stated that NIHR would be undertaking evaluations of its investments in Biomedical Research Centres (BRCs), which are important for underpinning translational research, and of the Efficacy and Mechanisms Evaluation scheme (EME), which is jointly funded by the MRC. Council questioned the type of industry involvement seen and how this would be expected to change over the next five years. There was a wide range of industry involvement, from large Pharma, SMEs and even larger industry outside of Pharma. Members asked what factors were key for success. Dr Viney confirmed that early involvement of industry partners was key; projects that had early involvement from industry partners were more likely to progress to clinical trials, to lead to licencing arrangements, and to secure continued funding. Industry partners contributed knowledge and expertise in intellectual property management, project management and a knowledge of the pathway to translate discoveries to market. Importantly industry involvement helped terminate projects that were unlikely to lead to a marketable product early. Members agreed that building a culture where strong project management is valued, and termination of projects is not synonymous with failure, was important.

Council suggested that the MRC should consider whether it has a greater role to play as an intermediary, to encourage more meaningful industry partnerships. Members commented there were multiple audiences for this report and discussions with the Treasury and UKRI would help to inform the MRC's next steps in refining its forward-looking translational strategy.

## **11. Updates from the Executive**

Professor Watt introduced this item and informed Council that the updates provided within the paper were for information.

Susan Simon flagged that the business case for the London Institute for Medical Sciences (LMS) building project had been considered by the BEIS project investment committee (PIC) and approval was expected imminently once the recommendations had been reviewed by the Cabinet Office

## **12. Any other business and close**

No other business was raised.

## **13. Council private business**

Following the meeting members held a private business meeting.