

Author: Simone Bryan

Trade Union side access: Y

Minutes of the Council Business meeting held on 3 July 2024

Attendees		
MRC Council	Executive Board	Presenters/Guests
Patrick Chinnery	Hugh Dunlop	Louise Jones
Richard Murley	Alastair Lamb	Sophie Liddell
Roger Highfield	Claire Newland	Gail Marzetti
Simon Hollingsworth	Jonathan Pearce	Helen Morgan
Precious Lunga	Susan Simon	Peter Parker
Jill Pell		Nathan Richardson
Munir Pirmohamed	Observers	
Andy Richards	Rebecca Aarons	Secretariat
Eleanor Riley	Jo Latimer	Simone Bryan
Graham Spittle	Heike Weber	Kate Vellender

1. Council Private Business

Before the start of the meeting, Council held a private business meeting.

2. Welcome and Apologies

The Council Business meeting on 3 July 2024 was held at Caxton House, chaired by Senior Independent Member, Mr Richard Murley.

Apologies were received from Professor Lucy Chappell. Dr Gail Marzetti, (Director of Science, Research and Evidence at DHSC and Deputy CEO of NIHR), attended the meeting in Professor Chappell's absence.

Professor Patrick Chinnery updated members that it was Hugh Dunlop's and Richard Murley's last meeting and thanked them for their contributions to MRC and Council.

3. Register of declared interests

Mr Murley asked members to declare any new interests. No new interests were declared.

4. Minutes of the Council Business meeting on 13 March 2024

The minutes were confirmed as an accurate record of the meeting.

5. Updates from the Executive

Hugh Dunlop, MRC's Chief Operating and Finance Officer updated members on the ongoing requirement to reduce UKRI operating expenditure, including headcount, and the risk this posed to delivery of MRC's scientific strategic objectives. As MRC's investment in research

was being spread thinner and staff resources were stretched, this would be an important area of focus for the new Senior Executive team.

Members noted the update. The challenge of deciding how best to focus MRC's investment was acknowledged.

6. Finance Report

Hugh Dunlop, MRC's Chief Operating and Finance Officer introduced this item and updated Council on the overall financial position, the 2024/25 Extramural Commitment Budget and allocations, and financial year 2025/26 commissions.

The full year budget for FY24/25 reflected a reduction to in year Spend Budgets, reflecting MRC's equitable share of the UKRI required budget reductions to maintain UKRI to a manageable risk adjusted financial position. Within MRC this reduction had not resulted in change to any planned activities as it was reflective of predicted underspends, normally utilised for unplanned emergent activities. Work had commenced to support the next spending review period FY25/26, in the form of commissions from central UKRI Finance, the first step of which was to agree council baseline assumptions excluding any amendments or reductions that were applied during the current spending review period.

Council noted the update. In previous years underspend had been redeployed to support strategic priorities and to increase MRC's capital allocation to support infrastructure investments and additional equipment awards. Members asked whether longer-term approaches to reductions to in-year spend budgets were being considered. It was confirmed that this was being considered by UKRI within its Spending Review scenarios.

Members emphasised the importance of accounting for potential increases in clinical academic salaries in modelling MRC financial pressures and baseline assumptions.

7. MRC and UKRI Strategic Finance

Dr Jonathan Pearce, MRC Director of Strategy, introduced this item and provided Council with an overview of MRC and UKRI expenditure, to support discussions on Spending Review and within MRC allocation planning. Dr Pearce outlined the constituent parts of the MRC spend budget from core and non-core sources, and how the relative size of these building blocks compared to other Research Councils of UKRI. Trends in MRC expenditure over time were presented, showing that inflation had eroded real term budgets. In this context it would be important to consider how UKRI could bid into non-core budgets, including the Technology Missions Fund and the International Fund, amongst others. Trends in the Health Research Classification System research activity funded through MRC and the National Institute for Health and Care Research were also presented. Since 2009, MRC expenditure had pivoted away from underpinning research towards translation and NIHR had increased its investment in treatment evaluation. It was confirmed that as UKRI is a non-departmental public body sponsored by the Department for Science Innovation and Technology (DSIT), it does not make its own Spending Review (SR) bid to HMT. Instead, UKRI forms part of a single DSIT bid.

Members welcomed the update and questioned the timing of the spending review submission and length of settlement. As 2024-25 was the final year of a three-year settlement, it was possible that a commission would be received this summer for a November announcement of allocations for 2025-26 onwards. Whilst SRs were usually multi-year, there would be no indication until after the General Election how many years the next SR bid would encompass as a new government may choose a rollover one-year settlement prior to a more comprehensive planning exercise.

Members made suggestions on how MRC and UKRI could work with DSIT and other government departments to build the best case for investment in research and innovation

through UKRI. While it was agreed that long-term, sustained investment in research was critical, members emphasised that this message was unlikely to resonate with the government's ambitions for economic growth and increased productivity. Rather, members emphasised the importance of promoting a clear value proposition to government that centred on MRC's unique ability to translate long-term investment in research into healthcare impact, setting it apart from other, similar stakeholders. It would be important to complement this narrative with case studies illustrating where research has been translated into impact at pace. Consideration should be given to framing further messaging in the context of economic consequences of an ageing society, highlighting how investment in prevention research would reduce pressure on the NHS, positively impacting on national prosperity and economic growth and increasing productivity. Again, complementing this narrative by highlighting successes of, and therefore demonstrating the importance of, investing in long-term, world class human bioscience.

Dr Gail Marzetti, Director for Science, Research and Evidence, Department of Health and Social Care, set out the department's messaging through its five 'I's priorities: Insight, Innovation, Impact, Investment and Inclusion. Members welcomed this update and were reassured to hear that messaging covered the span of MRC's and NIHR's coordinated work and furthermore, messaging was being co-ordinated across the Devolved Administrations, charities, and other stakeholders in the sector. It was acknowledged that while there was broad cross-party support for public investment in research and innovation, the fiscal position was likely to be challenging, making the next SR an extremely competitive process. MRC would need to consider how best to partner across UKRI and DSIT to ensure the recent largest ever growth in R&D budgets across Government was fully harnessed. Considering potential areas of disinvestment would continue to play an important role in realising MRC's longer-term ambitions.

8. MRC Translation Now and Future

Drs Louise Jones, MRC Head of Translation, Sophie Liddell, MRC Programme Manager for Translation and Professor Peter Parker, Chair of MRC's Developmental Funding Pathway Scheme, introduced this item which set out MRC's vision for translational research activities for the next five to ten years and actions that aimed to deliver positive changes quickly and build longer term impact. Examples of outputs and impacts related to MRC's translation activities were highlighted.

Council welcomed the opportunity to provide early advice and input into refining and developing the vision for MRC's translational research activities. Members commented on the need for flexibility within schemes and activities to facilitate connectivity and engagement between academic researchers and the people, groups and organisations that would enable their ideas to be translated. Some models for engagement were suggested and included annual engagement and networking events, virtual or in person marketplaces and guidance or training / upskilling for researchers, for example on understanding of technology readiness levels, which may help to embed the translational mindset that drives and enables translation opportunities. Consideration should be given as to how to encourage discovery science researchers to identify potential follow-on translation opportunities as part of their funding applications. A visual aid of the translational pathway across funders together with informative case studies illustrating pull through would be a useful resource for multiple audiences. Council noted the successful evolution and expansion of MRC's approach to translation and agreed that it was important to monitor and identify critical gaps in the translational pathway, so that MRC can adapt its response agilely.

The importance of facilitating people to pursue translational opportunities and broaden their translational skills, for example via porosity with industry, was emphasised. Pursuing translational opportunities at early or mid-career stages was perceived to be risky as

researchers needed to ensure timely and successful delivery of their grant or fellowship in order to be competitive to secure an independent or tenured university position and / or follow on funding. Mitigating these risks would need to be driven by universities, but MRC would be part of embedding a culture that fostered translation and innovation at all career stages. Members recommended that MRC should consider how it could better encourage and promote the existing support it provides to PhD students to identify and pursue translational opportunities arising from their studies. Impact Acceleration Accounts (IAAs) were recognised as a successful existing MRC/UKRI mechanism that, being devolved to universities, allowed relatively rapid support for people to develop their early-stage translational ideas.

In the context of a challenging fiscal position and resource restrictions, it would be increasingly important to work in partnership, particularly across other government bodies, to leverage funding and maximise impact. There were clear scientific and financial benefits to developing closer links across UKRI, for example with Innovate UK; for further developing relationships with NIHR and charities; and in partnering more with industry including Small and Medium size Enterprises where appropriate. The new MRC Director for Investigator-led Themes would have responsibility for driving cultural change across board behaviour to create an integrated innovation culture and ensure translational thinking and ethos was embedded across MRC. This would need to be supported by changes to MRC systems and processes that are more timely, flexible and responsive and allow researchers the ability to respond quickly to emerging opportunities.

9. Future of MRC core investment in the Centre for Macaques and Rhesus macaque provision to UK academic research

Dr Nathan Richardson, MRC Deputy Director Research Programmes Group, introduced this item which aimed to seek advice from Council on future investment in the MRC Centre for Macaques (CfM) following the outcomes of a landscape review of non-human primate (NHP) research and an operational review of the CfM. While the MRC had recently committed to the next five-year award for the CfM (circa £7.7m net of projected sales revenue, April 2024 – March 2029) there were major issues regarding the CfM's value for money and financial sustainability:

- the UK Rhesus macaque academic research community was small and continued to contract (focussed on neurosciences and mental health);
- MRC had received a relatively small number of applications involving Rhesus macaques over recent years, of which only a handful had been awarded;
- the number of universities with experimental Rhesus macaque facilities had recently decreased from four to two;
- MRC was now the sole funder of the CfM following Wellcome's withdrawal from co-funding; and
- the CfM building was nearing the end of its life and would need major, multi-million pound investment and the current lease with DSTL would need renewing within ten years.

It was emphasised that beyond the matter of the CfM, the MRC remained committed to supporting the use of NHPs in UK academic research where scientifically and ethically justified.

Council welcomed the update and asked questions about the views of MRC's Neuroscience and Mental Health Board and more generally, the provision of NHPs for research and whether discussions had taken place with the UK Health Security Agency (UK HSA) with respect to future partnership working. Link up with the Neuroscience and Mental Health Board had been managed through the Chair of the Board who had chaired both landscape and operational reviews, and another NMHB member (and NHP user) was a member of both panels

(although had completed his NMHB tenure shortly before the operational review). With respect to provision, it was confirmed that all grants funded by MRC, BBSRC and Wellcome involving Rhesus macaques must source their animals through the CfM. Regarding interactions on the Porton Down site, the CfM had established a strong co-operative relationship with the nearby UK HSA Rhesus macaque facility, which was also ageing and would need significant investment. The MRC had yet to engage with UK HSA to better understand their long-term strategic needs and to explore opportunities for joint working and a possible combined facility but this was planned as part of the options appraisal. It was highlighted that sourcing research animals from overseas was very difficult and costly, given that all commercial airlines had now stopped transportation.

Council recognised the significant sustainability and value for money issues of the CfM and noted the potential alternative options for supplying animals as set out in the paperwork. Council reinforced the Executive's position that the MRC should continue to fund high quality NHP research when scientifically and ethically justified. Finally, Council agreed that a new charging model for macaques (circa £100k per animal) should be introduced as part of the new five-year core CfM investment that much better represented the true costs of breeding and supply.

10. Streamlining MRC Council, Strategy Board and Major Investments Board

Simone Bryan, MRC Head of Programme, Policy and Governance, introduced this item which presented plans to integrate MRC's Strategy Board and Major Investments Board to form a new MRC Science Strategy Board. This was the first step in an ongoing piece of work to streamline MRC's advisory group structures to prevent duplication, achieve efficiency savings and reduce burden upon members and staff. The distinction between the role of Council and Science Strategy Board and main areas of overlap was illustrated by a Venn Diagram, which showed Council is MRC's most senior advisory body, charged with advising the Executive Chair and the Executive on MRC's overall scientific strategy and its corporate strategy and governance. It was proposed that the new Science Strategy Board maintains a connected and joined up science portfolio, overseeing and directing MRC's portfolio of major and strategic investments including strategic initiatives, international, training and careers and infrastructure investments, and bids into pan-UKRI collective funds.

Members noted the update. There was agreement that streamlining of MRC advisory bodies was needed to prevent current duplication of business and achieve efficiency savings, and that it was appropriate to integrate the functions of Strategy Board and Major Investments Board particularly as the role of Major Investments Board was moving forward to an increasing focus on strategic oversight of MRC's major investments portfolio. Questions were asked as to the scientific advisory structures in other Councils of UKRI and it was confirmed that other Councils have a variety of strategic science advisory groups/committees and/or networks in addition to their Councils, and that all councils' Councils are charged with development of their overarching, long-term strategy, as set out in the Terms of Reference, which are defined in legislation and set out in the UKRI framework document.

Some members commented on the lack of clarity in the distinction between Council and the new Science Strategy Board with respect to science strategy, as presented. Members were reminded that currently both Council and Strategy Board held several separate meetings a year to discuss business specific to the role and responsibilities of each individual body and that this need would continue. Some members questioned whether there were benefits of further streamlining to merge Council and Strategy Board into one body. As the new Science Strategy Board would have oversight of MRC's portfolio this board would need a broad set of expertise, experience of the full breadth of the MRC's funding, and a strong link into the

thinking of the wider scientific community. The Board would provide more complete scientific coverage of medical research than Council and would be where our deepest scientific expertise was brought to bear on quality and feasibility / deliverability of our strategy. Merging both Council and Strategy Board would result in a very large board and more meetings to cover the volume of business. Furthermore, it was recognised that appointments to Council were tightly governed by a UKRI process (including numbers ideally less than 10), and that merging of Council and Strategy Board would result in conflicts of interest in relation to discussions on budget / funding allocations and advice on areas of disinvestment, which was, and would continue to be, an important role for Council.

Members emphasised the importance of Science Strategy Board's role to maintain oversight of the whole of MRC's portfolio and the need to be more outward facing, with more engagement with external stakeholders in the UK and internationally. Horizon-scanning and the future direction of current investments should also form part of its remit. Council's role should have more focus on shaping MRC's vision, position in the landscape, and direction of its long-term strategy. Members agreed there were clearly overlapping areas in which joint working between Council and Science Strategy Board would be of benefit and that these could be managed through joint meetings. Council supported the plans to integrate the functions of Strategy Board and Major Investments Board, taking into account Council's comments on roles and responsibilities.

11. Annual Council Self-Assessment and 2024/25 Key Areas of Focus

Simone Bryan updated Council on the key themes emerging from the Council's self-assessment of effectiveness and the progress against the objectives set for 2023/24. Members were reminded that under the MRC Council's terms of reference, Council was required to conduct an annual self-assessment of its effectiveness. The process included a questionnaire sent to Council members, followed by discussions between the Executive Chair and individual Council members.

Council noted the update and commented on the proposed actions to better utilise Council members extraordinary range of talents and expertise, specifically the role of 'strategic champions' which would allow members to provide input into specific business area(s), with whom the Executive and office staff can consult while developing ideas, plans and issues, and through ongoing implementation work. It was agreed that members acting as 'critical friends' with whom the Executive and office staff can consult would be valuable and that through this, members could be called upon for advice outside of Council meetings. This would be fluid/organic depending on the issue in question. As a first step it would be important to better understand the breadth of skills and expertise individual council members could contribute, outside of their specific research or business expertise. It may be the case that more than one member could contribute to any given business area.

Members endorsed the key areas of focus for 2024/25 and recommended that stakeholder engagement should include engagement with industry.

12. Developing a framework for future Institute reviews

Dr Nathan Richardson introduced this item which set out the establishment of a framework for future MRC institute reviews to ensure that MRC had a consistent set of principles across differing institute investment models. Initial consultation with institute Directors had taken place which had identified a number of shared perspectives. There was clear agreement that the overall objective of the framework should be to provide stronger authority to the director counterbalanced with clear monitoring and accountability and to help simplify review processes. Advice from Council was sought on the remaining elements of the framework, where there were options on the way forward.

Council welcomed the opportunity to guide MRC's plans for a review and performance framework for its institutes. Members highlighted the importance of exploring during the reviews the role MRC institutes played as national infrastructure / assets, their engagement and partnering in the broader environment, their contribution to furthering the research culture agenda, and how sustained longer-term funding can help de-risk areas of research.

Council recognised that given institutes were diverse in their strategic and funding partnerships, in scale and structures, MRC needed to ensure it operated a framework with sufficient flexibility to tailor to individual interests and needs. The institutes were at different stages of development which was important when considering whether the detailed research review should continue to be managed by Head Office or locally by the institute themselves (following MRC norms and quality thresholds and with independent experts). Recognising that the Crick was unique in reviewing its own science programmes, Council advised that Head Office should continue to manage the detailed research-level reviews of the other four institutes. On the option of establishing a rolling programme of science reviews during the funding period, members highlighted the risks of losing efficiencies of scale and the sense that the institute was under continuous review. There was some discussion on whether the assessment of cross-cutting activities (e.g., knowledge transfer and training) should be managed out with the institute review. Members recognised the benefits of this approach in bringing together greater depth of specialist expertise, allowing performance oversight across the institutes and the development/spread of best practice. However, it was also important to ensure that cross-cutting activities such as translation should be considered as an integral part of the detailed assessment of the individual research programmes.

Turning to financial matters members agreed that an allocation of capital funding for equipment as part of the new seven-year award would provide efficiencies, agility to respond to needs/opportunities and would facilitate longer-term planning, for example IT upgrades. Members advised that capital provision should align with individual institute needs and that a cap should be introduced whereby higher-cost investments would need joint agreement with Head Office.

Professor Sir Munir Pirmohamed is directly involved in HDR UK as Director of HDR UK North and co-director of one of the demonstrator research programmes. This was not considered a conflict in the context of the meeting and no mitigating actions were required.

Items for Information

Council noted the following papers for information:

13. Health and Safety, Security and Resilience annual report

14. UKRI Management of Carbon Emissions

15. Sustainability Impact Report

16. Any Other Business

No further business was raised.

Equality, Diversity & Inclusion (EDI) and Environmental Sustainability considerations

Prior to the meeting, Dr Susan Simon, MRC Director of Capital and Estates and UKRI Chief Sustainability Officer, and Dr Sarah Goler- Solecki, MRC Equality, Diversity and Inclusion

OFFICIAL SENSITIVE

Engagement and Change Manager reviewed Executive Board papers and provided a short brief on environmental sustainability and EDI implications to Council.