



Minutes of the MRC Council Business Meeting

Date: Wednesday 25 September 2024

Location: Council Chamber, Abbey Building, Swansea University Singleton Campus

Time: 13:45 – 15:50

Council Members	
Professor Patrick Chinnery (MRC Executive Chair)	Professor Jill Pell
Ms Kay Boycott (SIM)	Dr Andy Richards
Dr Roger Highfield	Professor Eleanor Riley
Professor Simon Hollingsworth	Dr Graham Spittle

MRC Attendees	
Dr Claire Newland, Director of Policy, Ethics and Governance	Dr Helen Bodmer, Associate Director Health Systems Partnerships, item 8
Dr Louise Jones, Director Investigator Led Portfolio	Dr Sarah Trenfield, Head of Strategic Engagement, item 8
Alastair Lamb, Chief of Staff	Dr Rebecca Barlow, Head of Strategy and Planning, item 9
Dr Michael Ball, Head of Data Science	Dr Rebecca Aarons, Strategy and Planning Manager, observing items 6-9
Dr Heike Weber, Associate Director Strategy and Planning item 7	Dr Laura Dickens, Associate Director Industry Engagement, observing item 8
Helen Morgan, Acting Chief Operating Officer item 6	Dr Glenn Wells, Deputy Executive Chair observing item 8

Secretariat	
Simone Bryan, Head of Policy and Governance (MRC Secretariat)	Kathryn Jackson (MRC Secretariat)

1. Council Private Business

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

2. Welcome, Introductions and Apologies

2.1. Ms Kay Boycott, Senior Independent Member of Council chaired the meeting. Apologies were received from Dr Precious Lunga and Professors Kim Graham, Munir Pirmohamed and Lucy Chappell. Dr Andy Richards left the meeting part way through item 8.

3. Register of Declared Interests

3.1. Ms Boycott asked members to declare any new interests. No new interests were declared.

4. Minutes of Council Business meeting and joint Strategy Board / Council meeting July 2024

4.1 Council confirmed the minutes as an accurate record of the meeting.

5. Updates from the Executive

5.1. Ms Boycott asked members to raise any questions on the Updates from the Executive Paper provided to Council to give an update on recent activities, decisions, and major issues that the Executive has been addressing.

5.2. Council noted the updates and raised questions about the reclassification of HDRUK from a private body to a public sector body. It was confirmed with support of DSIT and Treasury, work is underway to reverse the classification of HDRUK by revising HDR UK's company articles, following advice from ONS, Innovate UK and external lawyers.

6. Finance Report

6.1. Helen Morgan, MRC Finance Business Partner, presented Council with an update on the overall financial position, and the 2024/25 extramural commitment budget, allocations, risks and future year planning assumptions. Discussions were planned at the next meeting of Ex-Co on how further budget reductions could be made and MRC had identified ways in which to further reduce in year spend budgets to maintain UKRI to a manageable risk adjusted financial position.

6.2. Council noted the update and asked questions about how UKRI was considering its approach to reductions to in-year spend budgets. It was confirmed that UKRI was reviewing its operational costs and undertaking a streamlining exercise to realise efficiency savings which would be completed at the end of 2024/25. Phase 1 of the UKRI voluntary exit scheme was due to be completed in November 2024 and phase two by March 2025 and this would also result in cost savings.

ACTION: MRC finance to provide members with an update at the next Council meeting on the unplanned royalty income and whether this would be a continuing income stream.

7. Spending Review plans and priorities

7.1. The item was discussed ahead of item 6. Dr Heike Weber, MRC Associate Director of Strategy and Planning updated Council on MRC's Spending Review plans, priorities, and threats and opportunities. Dr Weber outlined the process for the two-phase Spending Review that had been announced by the Chancellor, options for reducing spend in 2025/26 and the key messages and preparations underway for the phase two multi-year settlement, building on previous advice given by Council and MRC's Strategy Board.

7.2. Members welcomed the update and debated how best to prioritise the options for a reduced phase 1 spend scenario. Questions were asked as to the scale of reduction of spend for each option and it was suggested that priority should be given to options that carry the lowest risk to the stability of MRC funding and reputational risk to MRC. Members advised

that options to defer start dates, delay calls and re-establish the no reprofiling grant policy that was paused during the covid pandemic, should be prioritised. It was recognised that in some circumstances, an exemption from the no reprofiling grant policy might be needed, e.g. for studies involving clinical trials.

7.3. Council then discussed the future opportunities for phase 2 and recommended the following:

- That current investments be mapped against the future opportunities to better understand where there may be gaps.
- The language used to describe impacts should be better aligned to the government's growth agenda.
- The current definition of one health be expanded to include climate change.
- Better signal how underpinning capability and infrastructure is cross-cutting.
- A succinct set of key messages across the 4 streams, to better articulate what MRC does and what the impacts are, is needed.

ACTION: The Strategy and Planning team to produce a revised summary of MRC-UKRI Health Strategy for presentation at the next Council meeting.

8. MRC Strategic engagement approach

8.1. Dr Helen Bodmer, MRC Associate Director of Academic, Charity and Health Systems Partnerships, and Dr Sarah Trenfield, Interim Head of Strategic Engagement, presented Council with a summary of current strategic engagement activities and proposed priorities and focus of future engagement. Views were sought from Council to further inform the development of future engagement activities to advance MRC's strategic objectives.

8.2. Council welcomed the update and acknowledged the significant amount of resource needed to deliver the current engagement programme in its existing format. Effective and regular engagement with MRC's community was recognised as an integral part of MRC business as usual, however members recommended that engagement with key partners outside the researcher community needed to be better defined and more focused.

8.3. With limited resources a much more targeted and precision approach was needed. Engagement should be focused on those relationships that advance MRC strategic objectives. In order to realise this, members advised the following:

- Stakeholders should be mapped to MRC's strategic objectives and a better articulation of what type of engagement, when, with whom, and for what purpose is needed.
- A list of prioritised organisations / stakeholders should be produced which also includes names of MRC staff assigned as key relationship holders for each, and names of the relationship contact at the priority stakeholder.
- Key messages should be crafted for interactions with prioritised stakeholders, including for Council members who have an important advocacy role.
- MRC should utilise a customer relationship management system to keep track of interactions, discussions and outcomes of such between MRC relationship holders and other individuals such as Council members, and contacts at priority stakeholders.
- A review of resourcing cost and frequency of interactions/engagement is needed to ensure resources are targeted in the most efficient and streamlined way, without losing effectiveness.

ACTION: An update on MRC's communications and engagement strategy will be brought to the next Council meeting.

9. Annual SDP performance framework report

- 9.1. Dr Rebecca Barlow, MRC Head of Strategy and Planning, presented Council with an overview of the annual MRC Strategic Delivery Plan (SDP) Performance Report and thanked members for their input into the process. The performance monitoring framework and annual report are centred around the six strategic objectives of the MRC SDP and UKRI. For each priority, a number of statements summarise MRC's intent for the future and the changes MRC would like to see in the research landscape over the next three years plus. For each statement, a selection of metrics and measures have been identified which provide an indication of the progress towards achieving strategic priorities.
- 9.2. Council congratulated Dr Barlow on the production of the report and acknowledged the significant amount of work that had gone into its production and the contributions made from MRC staff across the office. Members commented on how the report provided an impressive showcase of achievements and that it would be useful to consider how the report could be used for as wide an audience as possible, especially given the resourcing requirements needed to produce it.
- 9.3. Members recommended that a succinct one-page summary be provided to Council alongside the full report to help track progress and identify areas of risk or opportunity. This could take the format of a short summary statement complemented with a graphic dashboard or other visual summary of progress. It would be important to consider the format and content of such a summary within the requirements of a broader reporting framework for Council.

Items for Information

Council noted the following papers for information:

10. MRC Regional Meeting event programme

11. MRC Investments in Wales

12. Any Other Business

- 12.1. No matters were raised under any other business.

Meeting End