

UKRI Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council

Minutes of the EPSRC Council

Date: 27-28 March 2024

Location: Swindon and hybrid

Council members and observers:

Professor Mark E. Smith (Senior Independent Member, Chair)
Professor Charlotte Deane (EPSRC Executive Chair)
Professor Jeremy Baumberg
Professor Alison Etheridge
Professor Jane Hillston
Professor Dame Jane Jiang
Ms Siân John
Professor Martin Schröder
Mr Alex van Someren (CSA)
Dr Joe de Sousa
Professor Tim Whitley
Dr Peter Williams
Professor Andy Wright

Executive: Andrew Bourne (Executive Director, Partnerships)
Jonathan Dawes (Deputy Executive Chair)
Nicola Goldberg (Chief Operating Officer)
Helen Morgan (Senior Finance Business Partner) remote
Jane Nicholson (Executive Director, Research Base)
Kedar Pandya (Executive Director, Cross-Council Programmes)
Mark Parsons (Director of Research Computing)

Attendees: Siobhan Peters (UKRI Chief Financial Officer) remote
David Rogers (UKRI Deputy Director Investment Strategy) remote
Carole Walker (UKRI Head of Risk and Management Assurance) remote
Jessica Dixon (Senior Risk Business Partner)
Kathryn Magnay (Deputy Director for Artificial Intelligence, Cross-Council Programmes)
Alison Wall (Deputy Director, EDI and People)
Amanda Chmura (Deputy Director for Business and Impact, Partnerships)
Derek Craig (Deputy Director, Cross-Council Programmes)
Lucy Martin (Deputy Director, Cross-Council Programmes)
Nick Cooper (Joint Head of EDI and People)
Adam Luqmani (Joint Head of Business Engagement)

Secretariat: Beth Amer (Senior Governance and Operations Manager)
Gillian Bartoszewska (Senior Governance and Operations Manager)
Neil Robinson (Secretary to EPSRC Council)

Apologies: Professor Deborah Greeves
Professor Nick Jennings
Mr Alan Newby

1. Council closed session

1.1 A closed session was held with Council.

2. Feedback from Council closed session

2.1 Council welcomed Charlotte Deane to her new role as EPSRC Executive Chair and provided feedback on the key discussion points from its closed session:

- Council recognised the impact of operational pressures and noted EPSRC's continued focus on delivering priorities and efforts to maintain staff wellbeing.
- Council members were updated on changes to UKRI Executive Committee membership.
- Council members were updated on Charlotte's cross cutting UKRI responsibilities, including Digital Research Infrastructure, Compute, AI, Future Telecoms, Quantum Technologies, and Semiconductors, and some of the opportunities these present.

3. Meeting formalities

3.1 Apologies were noted from Deborah Greeves and Nick Jennings.

3.2 Jane Hillston and Jeremy Baumberg were welcomed as observers ahead of joining Council from 1 April 2024. Alan Newby was welcomed *in absentia*.

3.3 Members were thanked for submitting their annual declaration of interests and were reminded to update during the year, as necessary. Members were asked to raise any conflicts arising during the course of the meeting; there were no new declaration of interests from Council members.

4. Draft minutes of the meeting 6 December 2023

4.1 The minutes of the previous meeting were agreed as an accurate record.

5. Actions and matters arising

5.1 Members were updated on the status of matters arising from the previous meeting.

6. Executive Chair introductory remarks

6.1 Charlotte provided introductory remarks covering:

- introductory meetings across UKRI and within EPSRC to gain a deeper understanding of the valuable work EPSRC teams are delivering
- major priorities within the role including training across skill levels and developing the commercialisation pipeline to take useful research into impact
- recruitment activity for the UKRI CEO and the Innovate UK Executive Chair

6.2 Council welcomed the additional investment in 65 EPSRC Centres for Doctoral Training but noted the overall 5% drop in doctoral students. Council discussed the dichotomy in demand between international and home doctoral students and recognised the need to work together with government, research councils, and learned and professional societies to develop talent programmes using imaginative solutions for career mobility and opportunities.

6.3 **Minute not included as contains exempt material, at the time of publication, under the terms of the Freedom of Information Act 2000.**

7. Executive update

- 7.1 Council received an update on expected fiscal events and noted the UKRI Board priorities for the next Spending Review (SR). Council suggested the inclusion of transparent operational expenditure (OpEx) rates when delivering research on behalf of government departments.
- 7.2 Council looked forward to the forthcoming joint meeting with the Science and Technology Facilities Council (STFC) Council in May to discuss areas of synergy, collaboration, and complementarity to work together as good partners and to avoid duplication.
- 7.3 Council members were updated on Department for Science, Innovation and Technology (DSIT) activity across the five technology areas, including £40m additional funding delivered for future telecoms delivered by EPSRC (as part of a new stream of activity in the Technology Missions Fund). Council welcomed closer alignment with DSIT to support programme delivery and requested a summary of Future Telecoms Technology Mission Fund (TMF) investments.

Action: Jane Nicholson

- 7.4 Council received an update on UKRI's organisational change programmes, including digital systems, people and culture, and operating model workstreams. Council noted EPSRC's efforts to meet reductions in OpEx whilst considering staff wellbeing and workloads. The Executive reflected on increased workload due to systems changes and workarounds for the UKRI Funding Service (TFS), and the need to prioritise work within EPSRC/wider UKRI. Nicola asked Council to support EPSRC in messaging into the community around our operations and constraints. Council welcomed opportunities to proactively shape TFS by encouraging their networks to respond to engagement and feedback requests.
- 7.5 Council members were provided with context for the Quinquennial review (QQR) of the Alan Turing Institute (ATI), including previous SR ambitions. The recommendations of the QQR were presented, along with the actions taken in response by EPSRC and ATI. The Executive confirmed alignment between the ATI's plans and EPSRC's ambitions, subject to final review of the ATI's strategy. Council thanked the team who conducted the review and noted a partnership statement was being finalised between EPSRC, ATI and DSIT, including the AI Safety Institute.
- 7.6 Council received an update on trusted research and innovation (TR&I) and noted UKRI had established a new shared capability for TR&I embedded in EPSRC, led by Karen Salt and reporting to EPSRC's Deputy Executive Chair, Jonathan Dawes as Senior Responsible Owner (SRO). Council noted the programme was working closely with DSIT and partners across the sector to align policies, and to examine where a coordinated approach might be useful. Council highlighted that universities were actively evolving their systems and processes, but would welcome further guidance and clarity. Complexities around encouraging international collaborations, which is part of UKRI's remit, would require careful thought by the TR&I team and additional resource.

8. UKRI senior colleague

- 8.1 Council welcomed Siobhan Peters to the meeting. Siobhan gave an overview that included the March UKRI Board meeting in Northern Ireland, UKRI's change programmes, the Services for HR, Accounting, Reporting and Procurement (SHARP) programme and opportunities for UKRI within the SR.

9. Spending Review discussion

9.1 Council was pleased to welcome David Rogers to the meeting to present on UKRI's approach to the SR, including the objectives and guiding principles for the SR bid. Council noted activity streams would include identifying priorities, developing the evidence base, and influencing through our communities to articulate the benefit and value of R&D investment. Council members and EPSRC colleagues provided additional context on EPSRC's approach, Critical Technologies, Discovery Research, and Infrastructure. New and long-standing Council members provided their views and expectations for the SR, and the advice from EPSRC's Science, Engineering and Technology Board on balancing across key priorities and opportunities for the engineering and physical sciences portfolio areas was discussed.

10. Spending Review discussion groups

- 10.1 Council moved into breakout groups to test the content, evidence and positions of topics including: AI for research, working with business, Net Zero across UKRI, Infrastructure, Responsive Mode as a National Capability, Doctoral skills, Critical Technologies, and Strategic Themes.
- 10.2 Council supported the overall need to be ambitious and agreed the SR was an important opportunity for EPSRC as a key player across UKRI activity to make compelling arguments for R&D investment. **Minute not included as contains exempt material, at the time of publication, under the terms of the Freedom of Information Act 2000.**

11. Review of day one

11.1 Mark Smith provided a summary of the first day of discussions.

12. Developing the new EPSRC Doctoral Landscape Awards

- 12.1 Council were updated on the evolution of EPSRC's Doctoral Training Partnership investments within the new UKRI Doctoral Investment Framework and were provided with a summary of feedback from stakeholder engagement regarding doctoral landscape awards. Areas of discussion focussed on:
- enhancing business engagement
 - levels of leverage in industrial-led doctoral landscape awards
 - diversity of routes to doctoral qualification
 - the breadth of universities to be supported
- 12.2 On enhancing business engagement, Council commented positively on the proposal for three annual intakes of studentships. Council welcomed the development of principles and guidelines to support industry partnership agreements and the requirement for differentiated assurance plans. Council noted the benefit small and medium-sized enterprises could bring and discussed how to incentivise, but not mandate business engagement.
- 12.3 Council commented positively on proposals to increase business contributions for industry-led doctoral landscape awards, but cautioned against exceeding 60:40, and considered whether the title accurately reflected the relationship.
- 12.4 Council reflected on the minimum threshold of studentships to receive a university-led doctoral landscape award and discussed the balance of administrative load and how to incentivise smaller departments to work either together within a consortium or in partnerships with larger universities.

13. EPSRC fellowships

- 13.1 Council received a summary of the current EPSRC fellowships offering and the landscape of fellowships funding within the UK.
- 13.2 Council discussed the value of the existing open scheme to the community, particularly in terms of diversity and career development. Council noted the high operational efforts required to deliver EPSRC fellowships as a factor for consideration, but not the driving factor for change.
- 13.3 Council highlighted that it would be useful to have comparison with other fellowship schemes to map duplication or gaps in the landscape; including trajectory of numbers, cost of delivery, place distribution and distinctiveness such as scale, subject matter focus and application conditions.
- 13.4 Council commented positively on continuation of EPSRC fellowships, but acknowledged the need to make difficult tensioning decisions across the portfolio and suggested that, subject to further analysis, they could be reconfigured to be distinctive and more targeted. Council noted there might be potential to combine fellowships with the translational research and commercialisation agenda and garner greater industry participation.

Action: Jane Nicholson

14. EPSRC's contribution to Defence and National Security

- 14.1 **Minute not included as contains exempt material, at the time of publication, under the terms of the Freedom of Information Act 2000.** Council were updated on and discussed EPSRC's Defence and National Security portfolio, including support for ongoing delivery, a range of underpinning capabilities, engagement with the wider defence and national security ecosystem, and how best to address stakeholder challenges.
- 14.2 Areas of Council discussion included:
- the interface between high-level alignment of strategy and the subject matter expertise and specificity of interactions with research councils
 - increasing visibility and permeability across EPSRC and Ministry of Defence and National Security partner interfaces to broaden opportunities
 - the advantages of avoiding duplication when developing fundamental research capability in collaboration with research councils
 - the need to be mindful of variations in language and nomenclature in communicating science and technology spend across stakeholders and in understanding research and development costs
 - **Minute not included as contains exempt material, at the time of publication, under the terms of the Freedom of Information Act 2000.**
 - opportunity for the Chief Scientific Adviser network to support conversations to develop research programmes and coordinate SR-related activity
 - the potential to improve funding classifications to enable better interrogation of data.

15. Risk update

- 15.1 Council welcomed Carole Walker and Jessica Dixon to the meeting. Council were provided with a summary of updates to the EPSRC risk register since the last review and an overview of the risk quadrant diagram.
- 15.2 **Minute not included as contains exempt material, at the time of publication, under the terms of the Freedom of Information Act 2000.**

16. Items for information only

16.1 Council noted the EPSRC Comms update.

17. Any other business

17.1 Charlotte formally noted the changes to UKRI senior leadership.

17.2 Council noted and shared their thanks with Peter Williams at his final Council meeting. Peter joined EPSRC Council in 2018, and his subsequent contributions and dedication were acknowledged by Council and EPSRC colleagues. It was noted that Peter has played a significant role in EPSRC and UKRI activities including the 2021 Spending Review, development of the 2022 Delivery Plan, and helping to shape the strategy and delivery of one of UKRI's flagship Strategic Themes, Building a Green Future.

18. Next meeting

18.1 A meeting will be held with STFC Council in Harwell on 14 and 15 May 2024.

18.2 The next EPSRC Council meeting will be held in Edinburgh on 12 and 13 June 2024.