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Minutes of the Council Business meeting held on 13 March 2024

Attendees		
MRC Council	Executive Board	Presenters/Guests
Patrick Chinnery	Rob Buckle	Rebecca Barlow
Richard Murley	Hugh Dunlop	Erica Doyle
Lucy Chappell	Claire Newland	Rachel Knowles
Roger Highfield	Jonathan Pearce	Catherine Law
Simon Hollingsworth	Susan Simon	Helen Morgan
Precious Lunga		Steve Oakeshott
Andy Richards	Observers	Heike Weber
Eleanor Riley	Kay Boycott	Ceri Williams
Graham Spittle	Heather Briggs	
	Sarah Collinge	Secretariat
	Mary Derrick	Simone Bryan
	Isobel Stephen	Kathryn Jackson

1. Welcome and Apologies

The Council Business meeting on 13 March 2024 was held at the Law Society, chaired by Senior Independent Member, Mr Richard Murley.

Apologies were received from Professors Jill Pell and Munir Pirmohamed. The UKRI senior observer was Isobel Stephen. Professor Lucy Chappell left the meeting at the end of Item 5 and re-joined during Item 6.

Professor Patrick Chinnery updated members on the appointment of the new MRC Senior Independent Member of Council, Kay Boycott. Ms Boycott attended the meeting as an observer. The chair updated members that it was Isobel Stephen's and Irene Tracey's last meeting and thanked them for their contributions to Council.

Members were reminded that the Council annual self-assessment exercise would be launched shortly. Members would be required to complete and return a short questionnaire.

2. Register of declared interests

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

Members were reminded that the annual collections exercise was underway. Following the Council meeting, the secretariat team would be available to assist Council Members in making

their declaration submissions. The secretariat was also happy to arrange one to one support for individuals if more suitable.

3. Minutes of the Council Business meeting on 4 December 2023

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

4. UKRI Update

Isobel Stephen UKRI Executive Director of Strategy, updated Council on the following: recruitment of the new UKRI CEO, the government's response to the Tickell Review, the science and technology framework: update on progress, and UKRI Spending Review planning and how budget split across UKRI will be considered.

Members noted the update.

5. Finance Report and Financial Forward Planning

Helen Morgan, UKRI Head of Finance for MRC and EPSRC introduced this item and updated Council on the overall financial position, the 2023/24 Extramural Commitment Budget, the 2023/24 allocations and risks and opportunities. Ms Morgan highlighted the pressures that UKRI faced across its portfolio. Spend profiles usually contained a three to five per cent annual underspend assumption and historically underspend would have been recycled and new commitments placed to hold to Forecast. Uncertainty to forecast and meeting year end projections remained, and Councils were not permitted to recycle underspends. MRC had highlighted circa £10m of additional underspend risk if not permissioned to recycle, noting there were levers to mitigate, if at UKRI level they did not require this reduction to meet UKRI final outturn against budget. It was presented at the last Council meeting that the 2024/25 Commitment Allocation would increase from £432m to £462m on the basis of risk appetite at the time, however, UKRI had indicated that there could be between two to four per cent reduction to spend budgets to Councils[to mitigate overprogramming along with a flat cash assumption of budgets into the next Spending Review period,]and therefore the lower FY 2024/25 commitment budget target[of £432m] was recommended.

Members noted the update and the risks outlined. Questions were asked about the level of risk in recommending a budget total with an increase of one per cent as was the preferred option recommended at the December 2023 meeting of Council. An increase to the commitment budget of one per cent would create an additional financial pressure on future operating budgets. The new assumption that the allocation would be reduced by three per cent going forward made the higher [£462m] option unaffordable, and the option was no longer considered sustainable. Members asked how MRC in year spend was being managed to avoid underspends, as other constituent parts of UKRI were not facing underspends. It was highlighted that several factors lead to the likelihood that underspends emerge during the financial year usually requiring rapid spend options to deliver expenditure in line with budget. MRC followed good practice in having a range of options available to utilise any underspends that arise in-year, either within its own allocations or elsewhere within UKRI/government. These options were being reviewed by the Executive on a frequent basis. As UKRI was managed as one portfolio, the risk was spread across each constituent part and MRC had often benefitted from this.

6. Science Commitment Budget

Dr Rob Buckle, MRC's Chief Science Officer, introduced this item and provided Council with proposed 2024/25 science commitment budget allocations. Council had previously discussed the approach to the 2024/25 commitment budget at its meetings in October 2023 and December 2023. Council's preferred options prioritised the budgets with greatest strategic impact and flexibility, while noting the need to maintain a healthy award rate across all elements. Changes in the fiscal environment meant that a conservative view was now needed, discussion focussed on the lower £432m level option; under this all allocations were reduced compared to the current year, by varying amounts according to priority.

Research Board budgets previously included contributions to Units and Centre renewals, which given the implementation of the MRC CoRE scheme were no longer required, meaning that the budgets available to award grants in responsive mode slightly increased for all boards, despite the overall reductions applied to them. The strategy budget would be prioritised as this represented the budget line offering the most potential for leverage and flexible positioning for the next spending review. This could also be re-directed to other areas, for example training, should high quality demand increase more than anticipated. It was noted that additional support was going into the ecosystem to support early career researchers through MRC being asked to act as agent in delivering on DSIT behalf, whereby additional funds had been allocated to Medical Research Charities in response to the continued pressures and ongoing recovery in the charity sector from Covid-19.

Members noted the 2024/25 commitment allocations and risks. Members commented that it would be useful to understand how the recommended allocation aligned with MRC's future strategic priorities and what the opportunities were for engagement with industry partners. It was confirmed that MRC was working on industry interfaces in several areas – for example in helping support delivery of the Life Science Vision and as part of the cross UKRI initiative on commercialisation being led by Innovate UK, and that as part of its spending review preparations MRC was leading a piece of work on emerging and advanced therapies to enable a more joined up and managed portfolio across UKRI. Members agreed that it would be useful to bring a discussion item to Council opportunities for industry engagement and investment in translational research. Members commented on the need to better understand the impact of reducing allocation across particular funding streams, and for this reason framing the discussion in the context of what areas MRC funds alone and in partnership, which going forward would support Council to discharge its duty to provide constructive challenge and advice.

Members recommended the lower commitment budget allocation of £432m, a reduction of nine per cent from last year, with prioritisation given to the translation and strategic budget streams, for MRC Executive Chair approval.

7. Pandemic Preparedness

Dr Steve Oakeshott, MRC Head of Infections and Immunity, presented Council with a summary of a proposed framework to support cross-government coordination of research infrastructure and funding in response to infectious disease threats. The framework did not seek to replace individual funders' strategies, mandate specific actions, or replicate existing initiatives. The goal was to enable delivery of research that helped to prepare for and rapidly respond to emerging infectious disease threats in the UK, and which contributed to improving global health security, ensuring that effort in an outbreak could be focussed on delivering critical insights quickly and not on overcoming administrative barriers.

Council welcomed the update and commented on the usefulness of the visual aids illustrating the framework. Members suggested that UKRI as a whole might be added to the aids (rather than some constituent parts), and that consideration should be given to adding pathology, pathophysiology and imaging to the research infrastructure and research discipline section of the framework. The importance of accessible data and data sharing, and ensuring surveillance was embedded as a fundamental part of the bid into government, was emphasised, as was the need to highlight the link between public health surveillance and economic impact.

Members queried the extent of engagement with industry partners to date, and whether work had been carried out to understand if there were barriers to industry engagement. In response, the positioning of the work was emphasised around enabling UK government funders to collaborate more effectively and consistently on health and care research to agree, for example, appropriate funding routes and reduce administrative burden, rather than as a vehicle to directly deliver specific actions. Accordingly, the framework should ensure that, when needed, a cross government group could be established at pace, and it would then be the responsibility of that group to ensure clear approaches to engaging with other partners such as industry. As part of the framework development, the Office for Life Sciences had worked with 35 industry partners to understand what was commercially attractive, but members agreed it would be helpful to further emphasise the importance of industry and ensure that suitable routes for engagement were clearly signposted.

Members supported MRC's participation in the development a cross-government bid for future epidemic preparedness funding in the next spending review.

It was noted that Professor Lucy Chappell is the Chief Scientific Advisor at DHSC and in this role will engage with the proposed framework on behalf of the Department.

8. Public Partnership Strategy

Erika Doyle, MRC Senior Partnership Communications Manager, and Dr Rachel Knowles, MRC Lead for Clinical Research, attended Council to share the responses from the recent consultation on the draft MRC public partnerships strategy, the updated strategy and seek Council advice on the proposed next steps. In January 2024, an open, online consultation on the draft strategy was run and three stakeholder workshops were held, to discuss views on the draft strategy. Feedback was very positive and 87 per cent of participants agreed with the draft strategy overall.

The challenges in successfully engaging the public in discovery science so that they could contribute meaningfully to engagement activities were highlighted. Council emphasised the need to understand the requirements of different public audiences, especially when developing a package of support for members of the public, such as provision of training. Whilst the challenges were acknowledged, members agreed that this was an important and worthwhile area of activity for MRC and that approaches may need to be shaped and refined in order to fully deliver its ambitions. Members commented it would be important to identify areas of best practice such as the patient and public engagement being delivered by charity and other funders. To this end, working closely with colleagues in NIHR and DHSC, who had expertise in this area, could help.

Questions were asked about resourcing requirements and how MRC's strategy sits within the wider framework of the UKRI public engagement strategy. It was confirmed that MRC would recruit a Programme Director to lead this work (part time and fixed term), and that the MRC engagement team and clinical lead had been working across UKRI to engage the whole UKRI

community. MRC was leading for UKRI in the area of public partnerships, and the planning and delivery of this work would ultimately inform and shape UKRI's overall approach.

9. Major Investments Board - second year of operation

Dr Ceri Williams, MRC Head of Strategic Projects, provided Council with an update on the second year of work undertaken by the MRC Major Investments Board, and the implementation of the new MRC Centres of Research Excellence funding opportunity which represented its major focus of activity to date.

Council highlighted the importance of funding in partnership with charities, industry and other funders (including Councils of UKRI) to tackle complex and interdisciplinary health challenges. Members questioned whether the proportion of MRC's budget invested in the CoRE portfolio was the correct balance, and whether the number of CoREs funded when steady state was achieved was sustainable. It was confirmed that MRC and UKRI finance colleagues had developed a financial model for the establishment of the MRC CoRE funding scheme and transition of the Unit portfolio based on 20% of MRC's budget at steady state, and this was considered sustainable. The model allowed for turnover in the portfolio and the ability to invest strategically, and in partnership. Investigators funded through the MRC CoREs would be eligible to apply for MRC grant and fellowship funding via response-mode mechanisms, and in this way, applications would be tensioned against other applications within the research board portfolios.

Members asked how the community was being supported to build networks and leverage funding, and what performance management measures for funded MRC CoREs were in place to help effect the changes this funding policy shift aimed to achieve. It was confirmed that outreach and communications activity had been ongoing in relation to supporting implementation of the MRC CoRE model, for example, community webinars and an MRC blog on how to grow positive research culture in big research investments. All MRC CoREs were required to establish an independent Strategic Advisory Board (SAB), as part of their governance structure to provide critical advice and support to the Director and leadership team. The SABs would be providing an assessment and advice on partnerships and leveraging funding. It was confirmed that the interview and funding assessment process had provided strong reassurances that change would be affected through the awards made, and that to support robust performance management of funded awards, an annual assurance process would be implemented before the mid-term review in year six.

Members commented that for future updates, it would be useful for diversity data to be included as standard within papers detailing funding awards made.

10. Council Forward-look for following financial year

Professor Chinnery, MRC's Executive Chair, introduced the 2024/25 forward plan for Council business. He highlighted that the office was planning to invite Council input and advice earlier, potentially at ideation or design lifecycle steps, which would allow Council to bring the value of their experience, insight, and networks to the development process. To assist this, the secretariat aimed for individual meeting agendas to consist of two or three substantive discussion items and other items tabled or for brief information updates.

Council welcomed the opportunity to input into the forward plan and commented on the need for clarification between the roles of Council and Strategy Board as there appeared to be overlap in some functions. Members commented that while Council had, in the past, decided to close major investments, there had been little time allowed on Council agendas to discuss potential areas of disinvestment. Members agreed there was a need to invite Council input

and advice earlier at ideation or design lifecycle steps and emphasised that; Council should be more involved in driving the content of its forward plan, and; consideration should be given as to how best to achieve an appropriate balance between advice sought on items that reflect corporate governance / operational matters, and advice sought on overall scientific and corporate strategy.

Comments were made on the quality and quantity of information provided to Council, and the importance of ensuring that the length of papers is kept to a minimum, key issues are highlighted, and the actions required from Council clearly articulated, was emphasised. Information presented on MRC's finances was one example of an area that could benefit from a simplified, standard formatting. Members highlighted how partnerships were critically important for the delivery of MRC ambitions and made a number of suggestions about potential partner / stakeholder discussions, discussion topics and the format these discussion should take. It would be important to further develop relationships with a number of partners including charities and government departments, and to increase effective two-way engagement with industry partners to better understand industry needs, and to strengthen the potential for leveraging additional funding. This would be important for demonstrating evidence of impact in fiscally challenging times.

Professor Chinnery explained that there would be potential for further discussion during the annual Council self-assessment exercise, which was about to be initiated, including the opportunity to discuss individual members' role and interests, with the aim of identifying members as "champions" for specific areas of MRC business.

It was confirmed that there was work being undertaken by MRC Council Secretariat to provide clarity on the relative remits of MRC's advisory and governance bodies, and that this would be presented at a future Council meeting.

11. Prevention Society and Economy

Dr Jonathan Pearce, MRC Director of Strategy and Planning, updated Council on the MRC Prevention Task and Finish Group and plans for a prevention themed pan-UKRI workshop. In July 2023 Strategy Board and Council discussed priorities for the next Spending Review and identified three challenge themes including 'a prevention society and economy'. In autumn 2023, in the context of heightened Government interest in maintaining workforce productivity, MRC convened a Prevention Task and Finish Group to advise on MRC's positioning within the wider prevention research and policy agenda. The group discussed where and how research into biological and aetiological mechanisms can enhance our understanding of the maintenance of health and development of disease and contribute to the identification and development of interventions to improve health outcomes.

Council emphasised the importance of considering behavioural and political science perspectives in this work; there was already a body of evidence regarding the effectiveness of interventions, however, many interventions were not widely adopted at the societal or individual level. In order to influence policy and practice across the UK, it would be important to set UKRI's research and policy prevention agenda in the context of the economic consequences of an ageing society and impacts on national prosperity and economic growth.

It was confirmed that the MRC Prevention Task and Finish group did discuss societal and behavioural level issues, and a need to better understand the link between social determinants and causal pathways of disease was identified as a key area for MRC to take forward.

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

Council reviewed the decisions made during the meeting for EDI considerations and environmental considerations, noting that it would be useful for diversity data to be included as standard within papers detailing funding awards made. The information provided within the MRC Prizes – Award Recipients and Future Recommendations was highlighted as an example of good practice.

It was noted that all items had environmental sustainability considerations embedded within the discussion.

For future meetings, Dr Susan Simon, MRC Director of Capital and Estates and UKRI Chief Sustainability Officer, and Dr Sarah Goler- Solecki, MRC Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Engagement and Change Manager would review Executive Board papers and provide a short brief on environmental sustainability and EDI implications to Council. This would provide an overview of issues pertaining to presented items that may be missed due to a lack of specific expertise within individual teams.

Items for Information

Council noted the following papers for information:

- 13. Review and Revision of the MRC Estates Strategy – Consideration of MRC Harwell**
- 14. Updates from the Executive**
- 15. Quarterly Operations Updates: dashboards**
- 16. MRC Prizes – Award Recipients and Future Recommendations**
- 17. Bi-annual Risk Review**
- 18. MRC Role in the UK Interventional Clinical Research Funding Landscape – Revised Version**
- 19. Any Other Business**

Under item 13, members commented that some UK universities were considering rationalising their animal houses into fewer facilities, which was helping to drive forward best practice and reduce carbon emissions.

20. Council Private Business

Following the meeting, Council held a private business meeting.