



Author: Simone Bryan

Trade Union side access: Y

Minutes of the MRC Council Business Meeting

Date: Thursday 12 December 2024
Location: Seminar Room A, MRC Laboratory of Medical Sciences
Time: 13:30 – 15:45

Table with 2 columns and 5 rows listing MRC Council Members: Prof. Patrick Chinnery, Ms Kay Boycott, Dr Roger Highfield, Prof. Simon Hollingsworth, Dr Precious Lunga, Prof. Jill Pell, Dr Andy Richards, Prof. Eleanor Riley.

Table with 2 columns and 5 rows listing Attendees: Dr Louise Jones, Ms Helen Morgan, Dr Claire Newland, Dr Glenn Wells, Dr Ceri Williams, Ms Stacy-Ann Ashley, Prof. Dame Ottoline Leyser.

Table with 2 columns and 2 rows listing Secretariat: Simone Bryan, Ms Kathryn Jackson.

1. Welcome and Apologies

- 1.1. Ms Kay Boycott, Senior Independent Member of Council chaired the meeting. Apologies were received from Professors Lucy Chappell, Munir Pirmohamed, Kim Graham, Graham Spittle and MRC Chief of Staff, Alastair Lamb. MRC Executive Chair, Professor Patrick Chinnery joined the meeting from item six. Dr Precious Lunga left the meeting after item 5.
1.2. Ms Boycott welcomed Dr Ceri Williams, MRC Director of Challenge-led themes and Dr Glenn Wells, MRC Deputy Executive Chair to their first meeting of MRC Council in their new Executive Director posts.

## **2. Register of Declared Interests**

2.1. No new interests were declared. Ms Boycott reminded members to continue to use the online portal to update the register. If needed, assistance could be sought from the Secretariat.

## **3. Minutes of Council Business meeting and WIN Sessions September 2024 and amended minute from Council's July 2024 meeting.**

3.1. Council confirmed the minutes as an accurate record of the meeting held in September. Council approved the amended minute from its July 2024 meeting.

## **4. Updates from the Executive**

4.1. Simone Bryan, MRC Head of Programme Policy and Governance, asked members to note the updates on recent activities, decisions, and major issues that the Executive had been addressing. No questions were raised.

## **5. MRC Communications and Engagement Strategy Update**

5.1. Stacy-Ann Ashley, MRC Communications Business Partner joined the meeting. Dr Glenn Wells, MRC Deputy Executive Chair, presented Council with an update on developing work by MRC's strategy and planning team to map key stakeholder engagement, including purpose and priorities, for future engagement. This work was in early development and would need to reflect discussions and suggestions from workshop activities that took place the day before the Council business meeting at a meeting of MRC's Science Strategy Board. It was noted that there were limited resources within MRC Head office to deliver MRC's engagement programme.

5.2. Members noted the update and acknowledged the progress made since the discussion at its September meeting. While it was recognised that the MRC communications and engagement strategy presented in the paperwork is an internal 'ways of working' document, members highlighted that overall, succinct, and simple articulation of MRC's world-leading science, its history / legacy, its leverage, and its impacts, was needed.

5.3. Council commented on the need to include international stakeholders in the list of audiences, and emphasised the importance of highlighting the benefits arising from the establishment of UKRI, especially with respect to increased collaboration and funding across Councils for interdisciplinary research to tackle major global health challenges, access to increased funding for infrastructure and talent, and that where appropriate, communications should be bolder in the differentiation between MRC and UKRI achievements.

5.4. Members emphasised that focusing simple messaging around MRC's track record in terms of its legacy and impact was the best way in which to give confidence to government, stakeholders, and the public about MRC's ability to deliver future successes.

5.5. With respect to Council members' ongoing support in their advocacy roles, a clear articulation of what type of engagement, when, with whom, and for what purpose is needed and that this should be aligned with Council members' skills, interests, and networks. Consideration

## OFFICIAL SENSITIVE

should be given as to how MRC will continuously adapt and respond to changes in priorities for engagement and the dynamic nature of communications.

5.6. Members also advised the following:

- It is more effective to categorise stakeholders into groups based on how they can support MRC to deliver key goals, rather than by audience type.
- With limited resources a much more targeted and precision approach was needed. A more concise list of audience channels with better articulation of how those stakeholders can support delivery of MRC objectives would facilitate this.
- MRC Staff across all levels of the organisation interact with multiple stakeholders through the day-to-day business of their roles. Better co-ordination and utilisation of the business intelligence and feedback from the community and other stakeholders collected through this route is needed.
- With respect to MRC's history / legacy, a simple, clear articulation of key its achievements, and importantly, future areas with potential to deliver similar successes is needed.
- Consideration should be given to a delivery plan document bringing these key points together, setting out MRC's history, leverage and impact; its engagement priorities and goals mapped to MRC strategic priorities; how these will be achieved and through which channels (including through Council members' networks and connections).

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

## 6. Council Private Business

6.1. Due to Executive Chair availability, Council held a private business meeting part way through the meeting.

## 7. UKRI CEO Update

7.1. Council members welcomed Professor Dame Ottoline Leyser to the meeting. Dame Ottoline gave an overview of key topics and took questions from members. In her opening remarks, Dame Ottoline briefly updated members on progress of the Spending Review phase 1 and a potentially challenging spending review settlement for phases 1 and 2; how, in a tight fiscal environment, UKRI is ensuring its portfolio is flexible enough to absorb fiscal shocks; the importance of government departments working closely together to ensure that the UK research agenda is well co-ordinated and maximise investment in Research and Innovation, and financial stability in the Higher Education sector. Members welcomed Dame Ottoline to the Council meeting and raised questions about the following:

7.2. UKRI's approach to communications with respect to the risk of losing individual Council brands and topline messages. While it was important for UKRI to be recognised, the work of individual Councils needed to be acknowledged and appropriately branded. This was particularly important for MRC's relationships with its stakeholders and communities and UKRI's communications activities needed to reflect this. MRC has an essential role in highlighting and celebrating successes of its R&D investment. To do this, language used, and key headline messages would be important for capturing the attention of Government and ensuring messaging was aligned with Government priorities. Dame Ottoline commented that it was important to highlight within communications the role of individual Councils, and when

## OFFICIAL SENSITIVE

announcements were made, to make individual Council contributions clear. There was a clear UKRI policy that work involving between one and three Councils would name individual Councils, work involving more than three Councils was branded as 'UKRI'.

7.3. In the context of the Government's growth agenda, members asked how MRC should be measuring and articulating its return on investment, and how UKRI can help overcome systematic barriers to attracting private investment into the UK. It was confirmed that it was typical to categorise research and innovation activity into those that would give short, medium and long-term returns on investment. Dame Ottoline outlined how public investment in research and innovation can link different parts of the economy, which, if successfully joined up, could help to build high productivity and growth, locally and nationally. The government's science and technology framework set out the key elements that needed to be co-ordinated to enable prosperity including R&D investment, skills, regulation and standards, infrastructure, public procurement and international engagement. Strong public procurement and policy stability would attract private investment. Furthermore, Mission Delivery Boards had been tasked with defining key delivery objectives that will drive forward each of the individual Government Missions and these objectives had to include solutions to overcoming regulation and adoption barriers.

7.4. As Dame Ottoline approached the end of her tenure as UKRI CEO, members were keen to hear her reflections on where UKRI had made strides in delivering the vision set out in the Nurse report, and where there was progress still to be made. Dame Ottoline highlighted the challenges of operating in a complex landscape, against a backdrop of political change, challenging spending review settlements and the pressures placed upon the research and innovation system by a global pandemic. However, UKRI as an organisation was viewed internationally as a huge national asset, and the approach was being adopted by other countries. The formation of UKRI had afforded many opportunities, particularly with regards to increasing interdisciplinary research, and cross-cutting activities that benefit from being delivered in a co-ordinated way such as supporting talent, strategic research themes, delivering the place agenda, and investment in infrastructure. UKRI had made progress to promote a positive research culture and increase diversity of its research portfolio and the researchers it funds by supporting a range of career paths, although there was still more to be done. Furthermore, there was still some work to do to foster trusted relationships across all UKRI's partners, stakeholders and communities so that all communities add value to the collective UKRI endeavour and to bring about a research and innovation system in the UK that gives everyone the opportunity to contribute and benefit. The UK's future depended on sustained growth in investment in R&I and UKRI is a critical national asset in delivering transformative impact from public investment.

### ***Items for Information***

Council noted the following papers for information:

**8. Update on the developing institute review framework.**

**9. MCMB Board Chair Recruitment.**

**10. Any Other Business**

OFFICIAL SENSITIVE

Members raised the question of how much grant funding, in addition to core funding, MRC Institutes were expected to secure. An update would be provided at the next Council meeting.

Meeting close