Council met virtually on the 10 March 2021.

The meeting was chaired by Mark Smith in his capacity as Senior Independent Member.

Summary

The main business of the meeting included a discussion on the Spending Review (SR) settlement and an update on the UKRI allocation process for FY21/22; a discussion session with Emma Lindsell, UKRI Executive Director Strategy, Performance and Engagement; a paper providing a brief update for Council on the ongoing review of doctoral education and the UKRI work on a New Deal for funding postgraduate research; a paper providing an update on EPSRC’s capital infrastructure bids; a paper providing Council with information on the membership of EPSRC’s advisory bodies; a paper setting out the results of a recent annual survey of Council members views; and finally an update on EPSRC’s current risk register.

Matters Arising

It was reported that, following a discussion with Professor Dame Ottoline Leyser at the last meeting, EPSRC had subsequently hosted a successful business roundtable event on 09 March 2021 with Professor Dame Ottoline Leyser. The meeting was intended to highlight the importance that businesses attach to their academic research collaborations and the specific role Research Councils have in creating for Business through five key approaches including convening new and existing partnerships. The meeting had been very positive and had provided a number of potential actions for the Executive to follow up on.

Executive Update

The Executive Update paper covered a number of items including the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic; the outcome of the business roundtable discussion; an update on planning for COP26 later in the year, and finally a report from an Artificial Intelligence (AI) showcase hosted by EPSRC for an invited group of CSAs held on 01 February. The SR settlement was the main topic for discussion during the meeting. The Executive summarised the current SR settlement position for FY21/22.

Discussion with UKRI Executive Director Strategy, Performance and Engagement

Emma Lindsell provided an update on current governmental and UKRI strategy development including the Place Strategy, the Innovation Strategy, and the People and Culture Strategy. She highlighted that these strategies provided an opportunity to pave the way for a more positive future SR outcome for UKRI. She then provided an update on UKRI’s own developing strategic framework and emerging implementation and prioritisation plans in the context of the government landscape. Council discussed the importance to EPSRC of both the Innovation Strategy and the development of UKRI’s own strategy and considered how EPSRC can best influence and support their development.

EPSRC Doctoral Education Review

Council considered a paper which provided a brief update on the ongoing review of doctoral education. This also provided an opportunity to consider the UKRI work on a New Deal for funding postgraduate research, which is being developed for the Government’s People and Culture Strategy and which is expected to be published in Spring 2021.
Capital Infrastructure Bids

Council were informed of the outcome of the first round of proposals submitted to the UKRI Infrastructure Advisory Committee (IAC) as part of the UKRI Infrastructure Fund. They were also updated on the development pipeline of ambitious proposals for the second round.

EPSRC Advisory Bodies

Following approval by the Appointments and Assurance Committee (AAC) of the recent Strategic Advisory Team appointments it was agreed that Council should view further information on the membership of EPSRC’s Advisory Bodies. The paper presented included data on gender, home institution and geography as well as details of applicants from the most recent round of applications. Council welcomed the paper.

Council Effectiveness Review

In keeping with Cabinet Office guidance and best practice in both the public and private sectors, UKRI Councils are expected to periodically conduct a review of their own effectiveness. This paper therefore set out the results of the recent annual survey of EPSRC Council members views regarding the way Council is currently constituted, how it is working and how might this be improved.

EPSRC Risk Register.

Council reviewed EPSRC’s current risk register. Council fully endorsed the Executive view of EPSRC’s current risk profile as set out in the risk register.

The formal minutes of this meeting will be approved at the next Council meeting on 19 and 20 May and a redacted version will be subsequently published on the EPSRC web page.