



House of Commons  
Science and Technology  
Committee

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**Pre-appointment  
hearing: chair of UK  
Research & Innovation  
and executive chair of  
the Medical Research  
Council**

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**First Report of Session 2017–19**

*Report, together with formal minutes relating  
to the report*

*Ordered by the House of Commons  
to be printed 31 January 2018*

## Science and Technology Committee

The Science and Technology Committee is appointed by the House of Commons to examine the expenditure, administration and policy of the Government Office for Science and associated public bodies.

### Current membership

[Norman Lamb MP](#) (*Liberal Democrat, North Norfolk*) (Chair)

[Vicky Ford MP](#) (*Conservative, Chelmsford*)

[Bill Grant MP](#) (*Conservative, Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock*)

[Darren Jones MP](#) (*Labour, Bristol North West*)

[Clive Lewis MP](#) (*Labour, Norwich South*)

[Stephen Metcalfe MP](#) (*Conservative, South Basildon and East Thurrock*)

[Carol Monaghan MP](#) (*Scottish National Party, Glasgow North West*)

[Damien Moore MP](#) (*Conservative, Southport*)

[Neil O'Brien MP](#) (*Conservative, Harborough*)

[Graham Stringer MP](#) (*Labour, Blackley and Broughton*)

[Martin Whitfield MP](#) (*Labour, East Lothian*)

### Powers

The Committee is one of the departmental select committees, the powers of which are set out in House of Commons Standing Orders, principally in SO No 152. These are available on the internet via [www.parliament.uk](http://www.parliament.uk).

### Publication

Committee reports are published on the Committee's website at [www.parliament.uk/science](http://www.parliament.uk/science) and in print by Order of the House.

Evidence relating to this report is published on the relevant [inquiry page](#) of the Committee's website.

### Committee staff

The current staff of the Committee are: Simon Fiander (Clerk); Yohanna Sallberg (Second Clerk); Dr Harry Beeson (Committee Specialist); Seb Motala (Committee Specialist); Martin Smith (Committee Specialist); Sonia Draper (Senior Committee Assistant); Julie Storey (Committee Assistant); and Sean Kinsey (Media Officer).

### Contacts

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# Appointment of the chairs and UKRI and the MRC

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## Background

1. The 2007 Green Paper, *The Governance of Britain*, proposed the introduction of pre-appointment hearings for key public officials in which Parliament has a strong interest. It stated that, in each case, it should fall to the relevant select committee to conduct the hearing, which should cover issues such as the candidate’s suitability for the role, his or her key priorities, and the process used in selection. The Government’s proposal was welcomed by the House and, following discussions between the Liaison Committee and the Government, each published guidance for pre-appointment hearings in 2013.<sup>1</sup> The agreed list of 50 posts that “would be suitable” for pre-appointment hearings included the chairs of the seven research councils, the chair of the Technology Strategy Board (now Innovate UK) and the chair of the Higher Education Funding Council for England (whose role is being split in April 2018 between two new bodies—the Office for Students, and Research England). Our predecessor Committee in the 2010–15 Parliament undertook six pre-appointment hearings—five research council chair appointments and the Technology Strategy Board chair.

2. In accordance with the Higher Education and Research Act 2017, UK Research & Innovation (UKRI) begins operation in April 2018, bringing together the seven research councils, Innovate UK and Research England. These nine bodies are included in the agreed 2013 list; albeit with some changes of name or (in one case) being split into two. The chair of UKRI, as a new and overarching body encompassing those nine organisations, is however not listed in the agreement.

3. The Committee in the 2015–17 Parliament nevertheless examined the setting up of UKRI after the Government announced in May 2016 that Sir John Kingman would be the Chair of UKRI “on an *interim* basis to set up the new organisation in shadow form”.<sup>2</sup> The Committee also wrote to the Business Secretary in May 2016 to seek the Government’s confirmation that the Committee would be given an opportunity to undertake a pre-appointment hearing with the preferred candidate for the UKRI chair once Sir John’s “more permanent successor is chosen”. The then science minister responded that “as per usual with significant public appointments in science and research, the preferred candidate [for the permanent chair and other key appointments in UKRI] will appear before the Science & Technology Committees”.<sup>3</sup> ***The Government should formalise this by adding the post of UKRI Chair to the Cabinet Office guidance.***

4. In December 2017, the Government announced Professor Fiona Watt as its preferred candidate for the ‘executive-chair’ of the Medical Research Council (MRC), and on 16 January 2018 that Sir John Kingman would be the UKRI permanent chair. We decided to

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1 Liaison Committee, [Guidelines for select committees holding pre-appointment hearings](#) (Nov 2013); [Cabinet Office Guidance: pre-appointment scrutiny by House of Commons select committees](#) (Nov 2013)

2 Science and Technology Committee, [Setting up UK Research & Innovation](#), Eighth Report of Session 2016–17, HC 671

3 [Letter from Jo Johnson MP to the Committee](#), Science minister, 27 May 2016

undertake a pre-appointment hearing with Professor Watt and Sir John, together, because they will be part of the same organisation from April and will together be involved in UKRI's administration and management.

5. It is regrettable that we (or our predecessor Committee) have not had the opportunity to consider undertaking pre-appointment hearings with other UKRI-related chair appointments made by the Government over recent months:

- Professor Andrew Thompson was appointed as chief executive of the Arts & Humanities Research Council on 27 March 2017, and the Government announced that he would “transition to become the first executive-chair of AHRC upon the creation of UKRI in April 2018”.<sup>4</sup> Our predecessor Committee was not consulted about a possible pre-appointment hearing at that time (Parliament was dissolved for the General Election on 3 May).
- The Government announced on 21 April 2017 that David Sweeny would become the executive-chair of Research England in April 2018.<sup>5</sup> Again, our predecessor Committee was not consulted about a possible pre-appointment hearing.
- Professor Duncan Wingham (the current chief executive) was announced as the intended executive-chair of the Natural Environment Research Council in August 2017.<sup>6</sup> At that stage our Committee had not been formed.
- Professor Jennifer Rubin was appointed as chief executive of the Economic & Social Research Council in October 2017, and at the same time the executive-chair designate ahead of UKRI's launch in April 2018.<sup>7</sup> Again, we were not consulted about a possible hearing.

**There are further UKRI-related positions to be filled in 2018. We trust that the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy will ensure that we are in future kept informed of prospective appointments that are covered by the House/Cabinet Office agreement, to give us the opportunity to consider holding further pre-appointment hearings.**

## The policy background

6. Pre-appointment hearings by our predecessor Committee were held against a generally stable policy context. The role and status of the organisations involved were not undergoing change. The situation is very different today. The establishment of UKRI in April 2018 will bring together organisations covered by the pre-appointment regime in a single organisation. The previous Committee reported on the setting up of UKRI in December 2016,<sup>8</sup> raising issues that would need to be managed by the incoming UKRI chair and chief executive. Furthermore, the nine bodies subsumed within UKRI would each have an ‘executive-chair’ rather than separate chairs and chief-executives.

4 [‘Professor Andrew Thompson appointed Chief Executive of the Arts and Humanities Research Council’](#), AHRC website, 27 March 2017

5 [‘David Sweeny appointed Executive Chair Designate of Research England’](#), press release, Gov.uk, 21 April 2017

6 [‘Professor Duncan Wingham appointed as Executive Chair Designate of NERC’](#), press release, NERC, 11 August 2017

7 [‘New ESRC CEO and Executive Chair Designate announced’](#), press release, ESRC, 26 October 2017

8 Science and Technology Committee, [Setting up UK Research & Innovation](#), Eighth Report of Session 2016–17, HC 671

7. We have taken the opportunity in our current pre-appointment hearing to examine with the prospective heads of the MRC and UKRI a number of the issues addressed in our predecessor’s report:

- How the ‘appropriate balance’ between research and innovation funding, written into the 2017 Act,<sup>9</sup> will be managed, and how the different levels of UKRI’s management (including the UKRI chair and research councils’ executive-chairs) will negotiate any changes.
- How the hoped-for greater focus on inter-disciplinary research (cutting across the usual domains of the seven individual research councils) and the Global Challenges Research Fund will be managed.
- The importance of ‘place’ — investing in research and innovation throughout the UK and beyond the ‘golden triangle’.
- The way that the UKRI, at its different management levels, will interact with ministers in setting budgets for each of the nine component bodies and overall; and how the Haldane principle (that decisions on individual research proposals should be taken by researchers through a process of peer review, rather than by Ministers)<sup>10</sup> will be balanced against a possible closer strategic involvement of ministers.
- How the innovation budget, and the business-facing focus of Innovate UK, will be protected.

We also used the hearing to examine Professor Watt’s and Sir John’s perspectives on the Industrial Strategy Challenge Fund (to be managed by UKRI), and the challenges and opportunities for science and innovation arising from Brexit.

8. These are all matters which we will continue to monitor as UKRI becomes operational, and Brexit and the Industrial Strategy evolves. Our focus in this report, however, is a more narrow one: to consider the suitability of Professor Fiona Watt and Sir John Kingman for their respective positions.

## The Medical Research Council

9. The MRC “supports world-class research across the entire spectrum of medical sciences, from fundamental laboratory-based science to clinical trials, in all major disease areas. Research funded by the MRC is carried out in universities, hospitals and in our own research units and institutes across the UK and in Africa.” Its latest Annual Report notes four strategic aims: “picking research that delivers (setting research priorities which are most likely to deliver improved health outcomes), research to people (bringing the benefits of excellent research to all sections of society), going global (accelerating progress in international health research), and supporting scientists (sustaining a robust and flourishing environment for world-class medical research).”<sup>11</sup> It has four priority areas for supporting research: neurodegeneration and mental health (including the UK Dementia Research Institute and networks in mental health research), antimicrobial resistance and

9 [Higher Education and Research Act 2017](#), s103

10 [ibid.](#)

11 [MRC, Annual Report & Accounts 2016–17](#)

infections, prevention research, and regenerative medicine (“the MRC is the largest funder of regenerative medicine research in the UK”). The MRC supports 2,800 researchers’ activities, in 113 universities.<sup>12</sup>

10. BEIS provided us with a note<sup>13</sup> on Professor Watt’s CV as well as the executive-chair job description and person specification. The executive-chair appointment is for 3–5 years. BEIS informed us that the position was run as a fair and open competition, and that external search agents were used for the recruitment. Twelve applications were received and six were interviewed, culminating with Professor Watt being selected.

### *The preferred candidate*

11. Professor Fiona Watt has an extensive career in medical research, including many UK and international leadership roles in the sector. As director of the Centre for Stem Cells and Regenerative Medicine, she brings expertise in a field to which our predecessor Committee gave its support last year.<sup>14</sup> Although not having a background in clinical trials, we were pleased that Professor Watt undertook to prioritise the case for the Health Research Authority to audit whether all trials results are published — an issue in our ongoing inquiry into Research integrity.

12. Professor Watt has a clearly impressive academic career history; one which is highly relevant for leading the MRC. In addition, she demonstrated a sound understanding of the challenges the MRC faces and how these fit in the wider context of the Industrial Strategy. She would clearly be comfortable interacting, and speaking up for the research council, with UKRI’s top management and with Government as necessary.

13. Professor Watt currently consults for two Biotech companies and is a member of the Unilever Scientific Advisory Board, and she is a non-executive director of the Cell and Gene Therapy Catapult. Some of these activities could be construed as potential conflicts of interest. We were assured that she has undertaken to resign from the roles as appropriate, if appointed.<sup>15</sup>

**14. We were impressed by Professor Watt. We were fully satisfied that she is a suitable candidate to be executive-chair of the MRC. We are pleased to recommend that the Science minister proceeds with the appointment. We wish Professor Watt well in her new post and look forward to working with her in the future.**

### **UK Research & Innovation**

15. BEIS provided us with a note with the job and person specification of the UKRI chair post.<sup>16</sup> The non-executive post is for 4–5 years, and part-time (one day a week). The position was run as a fair and open competition. There were seven applicants for the post, but only Sir John was selected for interview.

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12 Ibid.

13 BEIS [PMU0001]

14 Science and Technology Committee, [Regenerative medicine](#), Fifteenth Report of Session 2016–17, HC275

15 BEIS [PMU0001]

16 BEIS [PMU0001]

### *The preferred candidate*

16. Sir John Kingman has an extensive career in public bodies and management boards, holding senior positions in most of them. Perhaps most significantly, that includes the Treasury, where he was involved in managing previous Spending Reviews. That will be invaluable in ensuring that the Government understands the forthcoming spending allocations that it will have to make to keep it on track for delivering the Government's pledge for the UK to be spending 2.4% of GDP on research in 10 years' time. Sir John demonstrated a sound understanding of the challenges UKRI faces and the wider context of Brexit and the Industrial Strategy for the science and innovation community. He has clearly long been comfortable in negotiating with ministers. We welcome his willingness to promote the importance of investing in 'excellence-based' research and innovation beyond the 'golden triangle'.

17. In working alongside a previous Government Chief Scientific Adviser—Sir Mark Walport as the chief executive of UKRI—we accept that Sir John does not himself require a science or innovation background. Sir Mark will sit on the planned UKRI 'Executive Committee', alongside the heads of the research councils, and be a vital conduit for keeping Sir John informed as necessary about any science or innovation issues that need to be escalated to the UKRI Board.

**18. We were fully satisfied that Sir John Kingman is a suitable candidate to be Chair of UKRI. We are pleased to recommend that the Science minister proceeds with the appointment. We wish Sir John well as he transitions from interim chair to permanent chair, and we look forward to working with him in the future.**

# Formal Minutes

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**Wednesday 31 January 2018**

Members present:

Norman Lamb, in the Chair

Bill Grant	Carol Monaghan
Stephen Metcalfe	Martin Whitfield

Draft Report (*Pre-appointment hearing: chair of UK Research & Innovation and executive chair of the Medical Research Council*), proposed by the Chair, brought up and read.

*Ordered*, That the draft Report be read a second time, paragraph by paragraph.

Paragraphs 1 to 18 read and agreed to.

*Resolved*, That the Report be the First Report of the Committee to the House.

*Ordered*, That the Chair make the Report to the House.

[Adjourned till Tuesday 6 February at 9.00 am

## Witnesses

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The following witnesses gave evidence. Transcripts can be viewed on the [inquiry publications page](#) of the Committee's website.

### 31 January 2018

**Sir John Kingman**, Government's preferred candidate for the Chair of UK Research and Innovation, and **Professor Fiona Watt**, Government's preferred candidate for the Executive Chair of the Medical Research Council

## Published written evidence

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The following written evidence was received and can be viewed on the [inquiry publications page](#) of the Committee's website.

PMU numbers are generated by the evidence processing system and so may not be complete

- 1 Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy ([PMU0001](#))

## List of Reports from the Committee during the current Parliament

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All publications from the Committee are available on the [publications page](#) of the Committee's website. The reference number of the Government's response to each Report is printed in brackets after the HC printing number.

### Session 2017–19

Fourth Special Report	Science in emergencies: chemical, biological, radiological or nuclear incidents: Government Response to the Committee's Twelfth Report of Session 2016–17	HC 561
Third Special Report	Industrial Strategy: science and STEM skills: Government Response to the Committee's Thirteenth Report of Session 2016–17	HC 335
Second Special Report	Managing intellectual property and technology transfer: Government Response to the Committee's Tenth Report of Session 2016–17	HC 318
First Special Report	Science communication and engagement: Government Response to the Committee's Eleventh Report of Session 2016–17	HC 319