

Minutes of the 394 Meeting of Council

Friday 18 March 2022 - 15:45-17:15 GMT

Venue: Virtual meeting held via Zoom

Present:

Gurdyal Besra (President, in the Chair)
Mark Harris (General Secretary)
Paul Hoskisson (co-Chair of Building Communities Committee)
Gill Elliott (co-Chair of Building Communities Committee)
Sarah Maddocks (co-Chair of Sustainability Committee)
Jose Bengoechea (co-Chair of Sustainability Committee)
Colman O’Cathail (Chair of Early Career Microbiologists’ Forum Executive Committee)
Sharon Brookes (Elected Member)
Nigel Brown (Elected Member)
David Clarke (Elected Member)
Andrew Edwards (Elected Member)
Kim Hardie (Elected Member)

In attendance:

Kalai Mathee (co-Editor-in-Chief *Journal of Medical Microbiology*)
Gavin Thomas (Editor-in-Chief *Microbiology*)
Paul Duprex (Editor-in-Chief *Journal of General Virology*)
Sam Sheppard (Deputy Editor-in-Chief *Microbial Genomics*) for item 1 and part of item 2
Helina Marshall (co-Editor-in-Chief *Access Microbiology*)
Georgios Efthimiou (co-Editor-in-Chief *Access Microbiology*)
Martha Trujillo (Editor-in-Chief *International Journal of Systematic and Evolutionary Microbiology*)
Iain Sutcliffe (Chair *International Committee on Systematics of Prokaryotes* on behalf of *International Journal of Systematic and Evolutionary Microbiology*)
Peter Cotgreave (Chief Executive)
Joanne Manning (Chief Operations Officer)
Sarah Buckman (Chief Programmes Officer and Director of Strategy)
Curtis Asante (Associate Director of Members Programmes)
Alex Mulhern (Head of Journal Development)
Gaynor Redvers-Mutton (Head of Business Development and Sales)
Ellen Hinkley (Digital Engagement and Content Manager)

1.1 Apologies for absence and welcome to new attendees

The President welcomed all Council members, representatives from each of the Society’s journals and staff to the meeting. Apologies were received from Council members, Robin May (Treasurer), Tina Joshi (co-Chair of Impact and Influence Committee), Chloe James (co-Chair of Impact and

Influence Committee), Laura Bowater (Elected Member of Council), Kat Holt (Editor-in-Chief of *Microbial Genomics*), Norman Fry (co-Editor-in-Chief of *Journal of Medical Microbiology*).

1.2 Declaration of any new conflicts of interest

No new conflicts of interest were declared.

1.3 Publication of content from Russia in the Society's journals during the conflict in Ukraine

The President thanked everyone for arranging to join the meeting at short notice and drew the meeting attendees to paper 394-01 which summarised the current situation and detailed the discussions that had taken place by email so far on the matter. He noted that due to the seriousness of the situation, and the sufficiently disparate viewpoints amongst Council members on the next steps, he considered an extraordinary meeting of Council was appropriate to discuss the potential options in more detail, and due to the subject matter, the Editors-in-Chief of the Society's journals were also on the call.

The Chief Executive also noted that this meeting was for discussion only with any formal decision to be taken by email to allow for reflection on the discussions before taking a final decision.

He also noted for the benefit of Editors-in-Chief on the call that Council members had discussed ways to support Ukrainian scientists at its meeting earlier in the month and that as the Society was supporter of CARA, the Council for At-Risk Academics, he had written to CARA to re-emphasise the Society's support and to offer any further assistance to any microbiologist academics affected by the conflict. An email to all members with a statement of community and which pledged support to any members affected by the conflict and to notify them of the support available via CARA was also sent following the meeting, we had also written directly the two Ukrainian members we had identified to offer further solidarity and support.

The President invited David Clarke, Elected Member of Council to speak first, as in his role as an Editor of *Microbiology*, he was asked to send a paper to review from a group of Russian authors, with research funding from the Russian State Federation. He made it clear that he raised the matter to Council as he felt it should be discussed given the current situation with the conflict in Ukraine and wanted to hear others views on whether inviting reviewers to look at the paper was potentially contentious and whether or not the Society should still consider inviting reviews of Russian papers at this time.

The President thanked David Clarke for raising the matter and then invited the Chair of the Early Career Microbiologists Forum Executive Committee to comment next. He expressed a view that science was global and outside of politics and that all scientists should be afforded the same opportunities to publish their work regardless of the current political situation in their country. He further noted that the Society had not previously considered restricting the publication of papers from other countries where war or other morally abhorrent action was taking place, and so he had struggled to see how this was different and suggested that the Society may have to defend the reasons a similar stance has not been taken in the past or in the future. He also suggested that despite some Russian institutions supporting pro-war statements that it is difficult to know how much freedom these institutions (and individual scientists within them) had to make any statements to the contrary.

The President thanked the Chair of the ECM Forum Executive Committee and then invited the Chair of the Publishing Panel to comment. He expressed that this situation was very difficult and that he had been a strong advocate throughout his career for the freedom of scientific discourse, however on balance felt that the extreme nature of the situation in Ukraine made this much more difficult. He further noted that a limited number of papers would be affected, with six currently in the system, four for the *International Journal of Systematic and Evolutionary Microbiology*, one for *Microbiology* and one for *Microbial Genomics*.

The President then invited other Council members to share their views and it was clear that this was not straightforward with Council members agonising over this, with views ranging from feeling uncomfortable about restricting scientific discourse to feeling uncomfortable with doing nothing and continuing to invite reviewers as if nothing were amiss.

The Chief Executive expressed the views of those Council members who could not attend the meeting.

The President invited the Editors-in-Chief present on the call to speak and again views ranged with support for temporarily pausing manuscripts from Russian authors through to a reluctance to restrict scientific discourse, however there was some collective support for the General Secretary's suggestion that manuscripts from Russian authors at institutions that had publicly supported the war could be paused rather than all Russian manuscripts. The Chair of the Publishing Panel agreed that this would also mean that if the list of institutions on Rectors statement was expanded then we could be nimble to react to those changes. Council members and Editors-in-Chief considered this proposal and noted that Russian scientists at these institutions may not support the war or may not be able to speak out against it, but that on balance this proposal was aimed at the funding source of the research. A further suggestion that this temporary restriction could extend to all Russian State funded research was discussed and was supported, subject to finding a mechanism to identify it, possibly using the acknowledgements section of an article.

It was suggested that if a pause was implemented then it would be necessary to have an exit strategy and it was proposed that this could simply be that the publication of papers would resume when it was safe for Ukrainians to return to their work.

It was noted that we do not have any current Russian Publish and Read customers but a question was raised about future Publish and Read deals and the Head of Journal Development and Head of Business Development and Sales reported that there was a Russian consortium who had trial access to the journals for three months at the end of 2021 and initial discussions with agents had taken place at that time but since the war started no further contact had been received nor had this been pursued. Council proposed that if the temporary pause was to be implemented then any potential Publish and Read deals would not be pursued.

1.4 Procedure for agreeing formal decisions.

The Chief Executive observed that while some consensus was forming, it was agreed that no decision would be taken at this meeting and undertook to summarise these discussions in the form of a draft statement that he would circulate first to the Officers and the Chair of the Publishing Panel and then to Council members and Editors-in-Chief to consider over the weekend. He proposed that if a statement were to be published on Wednesday 23 March, then this would need to be approved by

9am on Tuesday 22 March and invited the meeting attendees to send comments or suggestions to him before this time.

The President wholeheartedly thanked everyone for their time and effort to consider this very complex and sensitive matter.

1.5 AOB

There were no further items of business and the President declared the meeting closed at 17:15.