



House of Commons
Science and Technology
Committee

**The Medical Research
Council's Review of the
Future of the National
Institute for Medical
Research**

Fourth Report of Session 2004–05

Volume I



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Report

*Ordered by The House of Commons
to be printed 26 January 2005*

HC 6-I
Published on 8 February 2005
by authority of the House of Commons
London: The Stationery Office Limited
£0.00

The Science and Technology Committee

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Summary

We undertook this inquiry as part of our scrutiny of the Research Councils and in response to concerns raised about the way in which the Medical Research Council (MRC) has handled the review of the future of the National Institute for Medical Research (NIMR). As well as examining the processes used by MRC to conduct this review, we also felt obliged to investigate serious accusations about the conduct of the Chief Executive of the MRC, Professor Colin Blakemore, that were made during one of our oral evidence sessions.

We recognise MRC's responsibility to carry out periodic reviews of its major institutes. We found that the initial rationale for its establishment of the Forward Investment Strategy (FIS) review in 2002 was not clearly established and communicated. The focus of the review was too narrow and it did not provide the detailed analysis necessary to justify its proposals to move a scaled-down NIMR to Addenbrooke's in Cambridge. Furthermore, by failing to engage the NIMR workforce at an early stage, MRC lost the confidence of the staff of its largest institute, and this in turn contributed to the fragility of relations between them as the process of review continued.

We conclude that MRC was right to listen to the objections made in the consultation on the FIS conclusions and to establish a Task Force with a more inclusive membership to consider the issue afresh. However, the appointment as Chairman of the MRC Chief Executive, rather than a more independent figure, was naïve, given the reaction to the FIS proposals. The Task Force adopted sensible working methods; its meetings were chaired with objectivity and competence; and by publishing much material on the MRC website, it was more transparent than many similar bodies.

We found that the Task Force was unable to give proper consideration to all the cost implications of the proposed move to one of two university hospital sites in central London. We recommend that the MRC Council gives full consideration to all funding sources in reaching a final decision. This Report concludes that the Task Force reached its decisions in a rational and coherent manner and we are satisfied that the Task Force gave due consideration to the option of NIMR remaining at Mill Hill.

The consensus apparently established by the Task Force at its final meeting broke down due to a misunderstanding about the future of the institute in the event of neither London bid to host NIMR proving acceptable to MRC. The failure to clarify this point, and to counter fears that NIMR might be closed, was a serious error and contributed to the worsening relations between NIMR staff and MRC. The Task Force should have considered holding a further meeting to seek to resolve the differences of opinion between members on this issue.

We investigated the serious allegations of coercion against Professor Blakemore that were made. We found that the means by which he sought to achieve consensus on the Task Force could reasonably be interpreted as heavy handed and inappropriately forceful on occasion but we found no specific credible evidence of coercion. Although, like other Task Force members, he had his favoured options for NIMR, we found no evidence that he had a "hidden agenda" for the Task Force from the outset.

We also considered the opposition of staff at NIMR to the proposals and their engagement in the process. We commend the way the two NIMR representatives on the Task Force engaged with its work but we believe that many senior staff at Mill Hill were more intent on resistance than engaging with the review process. Their actions stopped only a little short of serious interference with the process and a deliberate attempt to undermine the position of the Chief Executive of their own organisation.

Looking to the future, we believe that MRC should be prepared to take the necessary time to ensure that any central London option it chooses exceeds the current quality of the research facilities and environment at Mill Hill. If the right London partner cannot be found, we support MRC's planned alternative of reconsidering all the available options for the future of NIMR.

1 Introduction

1. One of this Committee's core tasks is scrutiny of the seven Research Councils.¹ We examine their policy, administration and expenditure, largely, although not exclusively, through a rolling programme of inquiries into each of them in turn.² We consider how the Research Councils set their priorities, balance their funding between different grant schemes and provide support for their various institutes and for students. Our interest is in checking that the Research Councils are performing their functions in such a way as to best meet the needs and retain the confidence of the research communities that they serve.

2. The announcement by the Medical Research Council (MRC) in April 2003 of plans to close its largest institute, the National Institute of Medical Research (NIMR) at Mill Hill in London, and to relocate parts of it on the site of Addenbrooke's hospital in Cambridge, was a major event in medical research. The aim of the move was to further encourage links between science and medicine and provide a strategic shift towards translational research. The proposals aroused considerable controversy and opposition from staff at Mill Hill and elsewhere, which led to the original proposal being withdrawn shortly afterwards and a new review being undertaken by a specially established MRC Task Force. We have followed closely the development of the proposals for NIMR and have been aware of the unrest they have caused and of complaints about the way in which the issue has been handled by MRC. We visited Mill Hill in October 2004, partly to hear about stem cell research in connection with our inquiry into human reproductive technologies and the law, and partly to hear about the development of the proposals for NIMR's relocation in central London at one of two university hospital sites put forward by the Task Force. Following this visit, we decided to undertake a short inquiry into the future of NIMR, not to second guess the imminent decisions of the MRC Council, but to examine the way in which the vitally important decisions surrounding the proposals have been managed and to explore a way forward that might improve relations between MRC and NIMR. We aimed to produce this Report before the MRC Council considered the future of NIMR at its meeting on 9–10 February 2005.

3. We received a substantial amount of written evidence for this inquiry. Many of the 122 witnesses who submitted memoranda are prominent figures in medical science, a significant proportion of them with experience of working at Mill Hill. We also received evidence from some who were directly involved in the decision making process, including submissions from eight of the nine members of the Task Force. We held an initial oral evidence session on 1 December 2004 with the Director and two representatives from NIMR who served on the Task Force; and with the Chairman, Chief Executive (who chaired the Task Force), and a Council member from MRC. In view of the evidence we heard at this session, in particular relating to allegations of coercion made against the Chief Executive during the proceedings of the Task Force, we decided to hold further evidence sessions with other Task Force members and to focus more closely on the way in which the

1 For a full list of the core tasks, see the Second Report from the Science and Technology Committee, Session 2004–05, *Annual Report 2004*, HC 199

2 The Committee has met its target of examining all seven Research Councils over the course of the current Parliament

decision making process had been managed rather than the merits of the proposals themselves.

4. We held a further session, on 20 December, by video and telephone link with two other members of the Task Force, Sir Paul Nurse and Professor Richard Flavell. On 10 January 2005 we heard from two more members of the Task Force, Professor Kay Davies and Professor Stephen Tomlinson. At this latter session, we also heard evidence from two members of the original MRC committee which recommended the move to Addenbrooke's: Professor Nancy Rothwell and Professor Alan North. Throughout this inquiry, we received from Professor Blakemore and others a large volume of the confidential email correspondence that had circulated between Task Force members during its proceedings. We are particularly grateful for this, as it helped us to gain a clear and comprehensive picture of how decisions were reached. With the permission of the authors of this correspondence, we have published some of the key emails relating to the process and the serious allegations that were made. The rest we have placed in the Record Office so that it is available to the public. We are extremely grateful to all those who submitted written and oral evidence and especially to MRC and NIMR for their rapid responses to our requests for further information.

2 Background

The National Institute for Medical Research

5. The National Institute for Medical Research (NIMR) was established on its current site on 49 acres of land at Mill Hill, north London, in 1950. It is currently organised into four divisions: Neurosciences, Structural Biology, Genes and Cellular Controls, and Infections and Immunity. It is the largest of the MRC's three institutes, the others being the Clinical Research Centre at Imperial College London's Hammersmith Hospital campus and the Laboratory of Molecular Biology in Cambridge on the Addenbrooke's Hospital site. NIMR's current annual budget is £27 million and it employs approximately 730 staff, including MRC directly supported staff, externally funded staff, fellows, students and visiting workers.

6. NIMR scientists have been responsible for some of the major achievements in 20th-century science. These include the discovery of Interferon; the discovery of the influenza virus; characterising the influenza virus haemagglutinin glycoprotein; the isolation and determination of the structure of penicillin; the elucidation of the structure of immunoglobulin (antibody); the development of liquid gas chromatography; the discovery of interleukin-5; and the discovery of the sex-determining gene.

The Clinical Research Centre at Northwick Park

7. Previous attempts have been made by MRC to bring together clinical practice and science in order to better exploit scientific knowledge and developments for the benefit of health care. The MRC Clinical Research Centre (CRC) was created in 1970 at the Northwick Park Hospital in Brent, London. It did not prove a success, largely because of the failure of the academic and clinical communities there to integrate and collaborate to the extent that had been hoped.³ It was unable to establish itself as a force in clinical research in the UK.⁴ One witness who worked as an NHS consultant there says that "there was a fundamental conflict between the hospital and the medical establishment and the MRC appointed staff".⁵ Professor Savill, an MRC Council member, confirmed this diagnosis, telling us that "the primary reason that Northwick Park failed was that it was science grafted into an unreceptive environment at a district general hospital".⁶ The CRC was moved in 1999 to Hammersmith Hospital Imperial College, leaving behind, according to one witness, a very good animal facility at Northwick Park. Several scientists who had been moved apparently struggled to carry out comparable research at Hammersmith.⁷ Another witness questioned the degree of genuine collaborative work at this site.⁸ Many witnesses drew on the failure of the Northwick Park co-location to argue that that simply

3 Clinical Research Centre Committee, *Report to the Medical Research Council*, January 1986, (henceforth referred to as the "Stoker Report"), para 2.6

4 Stoker Report, para 2.17

5 Ev 55

6 Q 14

7 Ev 76

8 Ev 164

putting clinical and academic institutions on the same site was no guarantee of improved collaboration.⁹ Others cited specific reasons for the failure of co-located institutes in advocating the benefits of co-location in principle.¹⁰ The experience of the CRC is prominent in the minds of many hearing the new proposals for Mill Hill and forms a distant but relevant backdrop to the current situation.

8. The proposal to integrate NIMR more closely with clinical practice is not new. It had been the original intention of MRC Council, when establishing the CRC, to move NIMR to Northwick Park, but this had proved too costly.¹¹ When the Stoker Committee was established in 1985 by MRC to review the performance and objectives of the CRC in the light of the changing clinical environment, it too was attracted to the idea of combining basic and clinical research on the same site.¹² It favoured a move of NIMR to Northwick Park in principle but found practical arguments against the idea. The current Director of NIMR, Sir John Skehel, sought to downplay the influence of the Stoker Committee, telling us that he had it “on good authority that no serious suggestion of a move of NIMR to Northwick Park was made to my predecessor and certainly neither on my appointment in 1987 nor in the 17 years since then has the Stoker report or any suggestion of transfer of NIMR from Mill Hill been mentioned to me by MRC”.¹³ We note that the previous Director of NIMR is recorded in the Stoker report as being “clear about the undoubted benefits to clinical science of a merger with the CRC” but he went on to note that in the ten or more years it would take to complete the transfer “the twin perils of blight and flight” could mean that there would be “little of substance left to transfer”.¹⁴ The Stoker Committee was persuaded by his arguments. In a comment which resonates with the current debate, it concluded that “a move could only be contemplated if adequate funding were guaranteed to allow it to be achieved swiftly, with minimum disruption to existing programmes”.¹⁵ It recommended a merger between the CRC and the Royal Postgraduate Medical School, with the integration of the NIMR on the same site—at either Northwick Park or Hammersmith—as a long-term objective, in order to achieve greater value for money. We note that both Sir John Skehel and Professor Blakemore quote selectively from the Stoker report in order to support their positions.¹⁶ It is apparent that the arguments surrounding the move of Mill Hill to a more clinical environment were well rehearsed, if not current, when MRC began its latest review. The long-term aim of co-location was a goal already established by MRC Council, albeit many years ago.

Quinquennial Reviews

9. The National Institute for Medical Research went through the quinquennial review process that is demanded of all Research Council institutes in 2000. This review examined the quality of science at the institute, its future proposals and the budget necessary to

9 Ev 61, 72

10 Ev 62, 77

11 Stoker Report, para 3.4

12 Stoker Report, para 4.3

13 Ev 174

14 As above

15 Stoker Report, para 3.7

16 Ev 173–174

deliver its future scientific programme. The review commended the “outstanding overall performance” of the Institute and was complimentary about the role of the Director. It approved the future plans for the next five years and noted the “added value” of the institute environment.¹⁷ There was nothing to suggest that NIMR was not delivering on its mission or was unable to meet future scientific goals. The relationship between the quinquennial reviews and the strategic reviews of institutes is discussed further in paragraphs 29–30 below.

10. The Quinquennial Review of the Research Councils themselves was published in 2001.¹⁸ Among other things, this identified a weakness in the long term financial planning of the Councils and encouraged Councils to develop and cost their long term capital investment plans. Research Councils are now asked to consider whether each institute is needed to fulfil the scientific mission of the Council. This recommendation was one of the reasons cited by MRC for the Forward Investment Strategy (FIS) review, and is discussed further in chapter 3 below.

MRC Vision for the Future

11. In 2002 MRC published for consultation its strategic plan for the next ten years. This resulted in the publication the following year of the final document, *A Vision for the Future*, which set out how the organisation was to address scientific challenges and health needs in a changing medical environment. The strategy identifies as a key driver the shift in focus from study at a molecular level towards analysing more complex networks and whole biological systems. In this context, it aimed to strengthen clinical research by encouraging interdisciplinary research across the basic/clinical boundary.¹⁹ Another goal was the development of clinicians better able to translate basic research into improvements in health provision. This emphasis on translational research reflected developments in the UK and international trends and provided the guiding principles for the reviews of MRC's institutes, including NIMR.

17 MRC, Quinquennial Review of NIMR, 2000

18 OST Quinquennial Review of the Research Councils, December 2001

19 MRC, *A Vision for the Future*, 2003

3 The Forward Investment Strategy

Origins

12. The underlying justification for any review of NIMR has been consistently questioned and criticised throughout the current process and during the course of our inquiry so we went back to its origins to gain a fuller understanding of the background. The MRC Council set up the Forward Investment Strategy (FIS) Subcommittee in October 2002 to develop a coherent long-term strategy for its major capital investments over the following 10–15 year period. The Committee was chaired by the former Chief Executive Officer (CEO), Sir George Radda, and consisted of eight academic, health services and industry representatives. It looked at strategic planning at four sites which faced strategic decisions over the ensuing few years: the MRC units based at Harwell, where the DIAMOND synchrotron is due to open in 2006; the Clinical Research Centre (CRC) at the Hammersmith Hospital Campus of Imperial College; the Laboratory of Molecular Biology (LMB) and other units at the Addenbrooke's hospital site; and NIMR at Mill Hill.²⁰

13. The original rationale for the FIS review was challenged by the Director of NIMR, Sir John Skehel, in the course of our inquiry. He suggested that there was a desire at MRC to relocate NIMR even before the establishment of the FIS review. In supplementary and confidential evidence to us he alleges that the original intention, circulated by MRC in a draft paper in August 2002, was for there to be a review only of NIMR. This paper “seeks the Council's views on a framework for reviewing the future of the National Institute for Medical research (NIMR) in the context of the retirement of the current Director, Sir John Skehel, in 2006”, and considered the principles relevant to its consideration and the timetable for a decision process.²¹ The paper identifies as the central issue of the review the maintenance of NIMR at Mill Hill in its present form set against the consideration of “other options in terms of location and/or structure”. It envisaged the commissioning of senior independent academic advisers to consult widely with NIMR and to produce a report to inform further discussions in Council. This would have preceded any public debate of the institute's future.²²

14. Sir John Skehel states that in his discussions with the MRC Chairman, Sir Anthony Cleaver, on this issue the poor state of the buildings at Mill Hill was also cited as a reason for the review.²³ Following Sir John's subsequent complaints to the Chairman and arguments about the health of the buildings, this first draft paper was withdrawn. The MRC Chairman wrote (in confidence) to Sir John to tell him that his concerns were understood, “in particular the consultation procedure that was proposed, could be read as prejudging the outcome [...] we have therefore decided to take a step back and start by setting up a Council sub-committee with a broader remit to consider forward investment strategy [the FIS sub-committee]”.²⁴ The revised paper proposed that a Council

20 MRC, *Forward Investment Strategy*, April 2003

21 Not printed

22 Not printed

23 Ev 180

24 Not printed

Subcommittee be established to look at the other major MRC institutes as well in order to present a long term strategy for major capital investment in time for the 2004 Spending Review.²⁵ It specified the retirement of Sir John Skehel in 2006 in its terms of reference. It envisaged that the Subcommittee would review stakeholder input before finalising its report.

15. We have seen the relevant draft MRC papers, the first of which was apparently not circulated to the Council, as well as the confidential exchange of letters between Sir John Skehel and Sir Anthony Cleaver. We put Sir John's allegation of a change of emphasis to the FIS committee members from whom we took evidence. Professor Rothwell told us that the issue of the long term future of NIMR was raised in Council papers in 2000, as was the future of other institutes. She said that "to suggest that there was something there and then it changed is not quite the right interpretation of that. I can see that you could put that interpretation on it, but I think you have to look at each institute's long term future. The idea then was to bring it together into one group".²⁶ Given the confidential nature of the exchanges between the Chairman and Sir John Skehel, we would not necessarily expect all Council members to be aware of the precise details of the evolution of the FIS Subcommittee. Professor North confirmed that he had seen nothing of any proposals which preceded the establishment of the FIS Subcommittee.²⁷

16. Given that the retirement of the Director in 2006 was highlighted as a justification for the FIS review in the proposal for its establishment we were interested to hear from witnesses on the FIS committee that Sir John's retirement did not play a strong role in their considerations.²⁸ We questioned why the change of Director necessitated a review of the NIMR. Sir John Skehel argued that it is normal practice to review the future of a unit when its Director leaves but not that of a multi-disciplinary institute. At NIMR it is not the scientific leader of each division or unit who is retiring.²⁹ We understand that there have been reviews of the institute's future prior to the recruitment of previous Directors. We accept that the role of the Director is extremely important to the management, reputation and well-being of an institute. However, we consider that, whilst the direction of a smaller unit may generally be strongly influenced by the head of it, in a large institute with several divisions, many disciplines and specialist scientists, the individual scientific strengths of the director are not always so important. We agree that a change of Director of a national institute should not necessarily in itself require a strategic change for the institute if it is performing well, nor should a change of direction be impossible to achieve with the same Director. Taken together with other factors, such as a change in focus of medical research, there might well be a case for fundamental review, but the reasons for any review should be spelled out clearly from the outset.

17. Sir John told us that what he calls the "shifting rationale" of the basis for the review and the close proximity of the FIS review to the quinquennial review "certainly influenced how the Institute received the FIS proposals".³⁰ It is difficult to ascertain at this distance the

25 Ev 179

26 Q 228

27 Q 229

28 Qs 247, 252

29 Ev 179

30 Ev 179

precise motivation for the FIS review and to judge whether there was a preconception about the state of the buildings at Mill Hill. In this context, we were disappointed that the Chief Executive at the time, Sir George Radda, declined our invitation to submit written evidence on this point on the grounds that he no longer held records of discussions of these matters.³¹

18. We fully support the need for long term strategic reviews of investment to complement the science-orientated programme of quinquennial reviews. In our Reports on the Research Councils, we have consistently supported the policy of regular and stringent reviews of institutes established and supported by the Councils. We believe that there was a strong case for a review of MRC's long term investment strategy and that MRC was doing its job in seeking to match its future investment needs with the priorities it set out in its *A Vision for the Future* strategy, itself the result of consultation with stakeholders. It was right to ask the question as to whether the £27 million it was spending per annum on the NIMR would be more productively spent in another way. However, **the reasons for taking a long term look at the direction and viability of NIMR at Mill Hill were not presented in a coherent or convincing way to NIMR staff or the wider community. The initial proposal for the FIS review made no reference to the simultaneous strategic science review. MRC was right to broaden any initial focus on NIMR to include other facilities, but the consequence was that management at NIMR gained the impression that the focus was really on Mill Hill and, rightly or wrongly, confidence in the ensuing process of review was damaged at the outset.**

Work of the Forward Investment Strategy Subcommittee

19. The FIS Subcommittee met four times before presenting its report to the MRC Council in March 2003. In developing its proposals, the FIS Committee took as its “primary scientific reference point” MRC's ten year strategy, *A Vision for the Future*. It then developed a template for optimal medical research environments to deliver international excellence over the next 10–15 years, based on the following principles:

- Importance of appropriate 2-way academic, clinical, and industrial linkages;
- Ease and breadth of on-site interdisciplinary collaborations;
- Issues of added value/opportunity cost;
- Optimal scale/size for MRC institutes;
- Financial flexibility—preserving scope for MRC to move quickly to capitalise on new scientific opportunities; and
- Focus on fewer locations with a view to providing first rate infrastructure and crucial mass for training/career development, but retaining scope to support high quality research wherever it can best be done.³²

31 Letter to the Clerk from Sir George Radda; not printed.

32 FIS Report, http://www.mrc.ac.uk/index/about/about-organisation/about-bodies_and_members/pdf-fis_consultation.pdf-link, paras 1.3 and 3.4

Consideration of the options

20. The FIS Committee concluded that, when assessed against this template, the case for maintaining Mill Hill on its present site was “not strong”.³³ It gave two reasons:

NIMR at its present location may be too isolated from clinical and other academic units to compete and remain as attractive to scientists; and

The cost of maintaining the institute would have significant implications for MRC’s future financial flexibility.

21. Future research environments had to present significant opportunities for multi-disciplinary work, strong clinical and academic links and opportunities for translating research into the health service and the commercial sector.³⁴ It concluded that “in terms of opportunity cost, a new smaller investment in a clinical multi-disciplinary environment for the Institute would be likely to deliver a similar volume of science and greater value for money in the longer-term”.³⁵ It recommended that the future scientific programme of NIMR should be developed on a university/medical school site at Addenbrooke’s in Cambridge.

22. The FIS report is important to the current proposals because it enunciated the principles upon which the Task Force was asked to build in its consideration of a broader range of options. In our view the report from the FIS committee does not provide convincing evidence that it explored all aspects of its remit with the vigour necessary to back up its conclusions. The FIS committee did not appear to question in detail the principle that interaction is necessarily improved by physical proximity. The written evidence that we received was very divided on this point: some, including Professor Rothwell, took the view that interaction between clinician and scientist must be easier if they are both based on the same site.³⁶ Others argued that co-location could often lead to “a dilution of focused effort”³⁷ and that “translation is largely an intellectual process that transcends distances”.³⁸ We recognise that the arguments are complex and deserve thorough exploration in order to see if a consensus can be established. Instead, it seems to us that the FIS committee took as its starting point its perception of an ideal research environment, as derived from the MRC ten year strategy, and did not question it. Given this template, and the principles on which the committee based its work, it was inevitable that the Mill Hill site would not match up to the ideal environment for medical research, with its focus on clinical/academic links. Professor Rothwell confirmed that it would be “very difficult” for it to meet this template.³⁹ The FIS committee did not explore thoroughly the scenario whereby institutions could retain independence whilst having the flexibility to

33 FIS Report, http://www.mrc.ac.uk/index/about/about-organisation/about-bodies_and_members/pdf-fis_consultation.pdf-link, para 1.7

34 FIS Report, http://www.mrc.ac.uk/index/about/about-organisation/about-bodies_and_members/pdf-fis_consultation.pdf-link, para 3.3

35 FIS Report, http://www.mrc.ac.uk/index/about/about-organisation/about-bodies_and_members/pdf-fis_consultation.pdf-link, para 4b.4

36 Ev 79; Q 211 [Rothwell]

37 Ev 59

38 Ev 102

39 Qs 205–7

pursue their own relationships with multiple clinical centres of their choice. We have not re-examined all the pros and cons of the principle of co-location in great detail: the Task Force undertook this difficult job. We would hope, however, that the argument put forward by Professor North that Mill Hill was “physically becoming isolated” was, given the progress of modern communication technology, at least thoroughly explored by the FIS committee before it reached its conclusions.

23. The issue of value for money was one which might have been expected to be considered closely by the committee, given that one of the drivers behind the FIS process was to meet OST’s demands for better long term capital investment planning over a 15 year period and to underpin a bid for the 2004 Spending Review. As we have mentioned, the FIS committee concluded that one of the reasons for proposing a move from the Mill Hill site was that the likely investment required for NIMR to remain viable at Mill Hill had “significant financial implications for MRC’s future financial flexibility” and that “a new smaller investment in a clinical multi-disciplinary environment would be likely to deliver a similar volume of science and greater value for money in the longer term”.⁴⁰ There is no evidence adduced in the report to support these conclusions. We were told that there was an assumption in the FIS committee that London might be more expensive⁴¹—not an argument that the Task Force found persuasive—but we saw no supporting evidence or research to back up this assumption. The level of investment required to maintain the buildings at Mill Hill was later the subject of some dispute in the Task Force and did not seem to be the subject of an informed estimate by the FIS committee.⁴² Given the conclusion referred to above about value for money, we were surprised to hear from FIS Subcommittee members that costs were not considered “in any detail at all”.⁴³ Professor North told us that it would be difficult to envisage a cost benefit analysis projecting forward for 15–20 years.⁴⁴ There was some discussion of the potential of co-located institutes to share infrastructure costs but “no detailed financial considerations”.⁴⁵ Witnesses explained that the primary driver was scientific value and getting the best research.⁴⁶

24. Like other Research Councils, MRC has a responsibility to delivering the best science it can using the resources made available to it. No research funding council can sensibly divorce its consideration of the different options for delivering its science from the costs of each one. There may have been a case for the move to Addenbrooke’s based on the reinvestment of the revenue accruing from the sale of the Mill Hill site at a different location or locations. But such a case was not set out in the proposals. Cost should not necessarily be the driving force behind change in any review of investment in science but it has to at least be carefully considered. **We were told by members of the committee on the Forward Investment Strategy that their work was “not about money”, and yet cost was**

40 FIS Report, http://www.mrc.ac.uk/index/about/about-organisation/about-bodies_and_members/pdf-fis_consultation.pdf-link, para 4b.4

41 Q 221 [Rothwell]

42 See para 24

43 Q 209 [Rothwell]

44 Q 209 [North]

45 Q 236

46 Q 233

one of the two reasons given for its conclusions. It is regrettable that confusion over the justification for the conclusions of the FIS review was allowed to develop.

25. Similarly, we are not persuaded that the recommendation of a move to Addenbrooke's was thoroughly thought through. In the FIS committee's report, the suggestion is made right at the end in the context of investment at Addenbrooke's. There is no indication that other locations outside the golden triangle between London, Oxford and Cambridge were considered, or that the implications for existing staff at NIMR were considered. This was a major omission, given that the Task Force subsequently concluded that the importance of maintaining a critical mass of existing scientists at NIMR was such that a move away from London could not be considered. Professor Rothwell told us that London was considered but was thought to be too expensive.⁴⁷ She made a distinction between the FIS report, which put ideas down for consultation, and the work of the Task Force, which carried out "a much more detailed in-depth analysis".⁴⁸ We accept this distinction but it shows that MRC were prepared to put forward firm proposals without conducting the in-depth analysis necessary to justify and explain them. Our concerns about the superficiality of the FIS process were reinforced by Professor North, who told us that it was "difficult to proceed" on the basis of the evidence.⁴⁹ He argued that science would not progress very quickly if evidence was needed to be produced to support any change to the status quo. **The break-up of a world renowned national institute and relocation elsewhere is a risky strategy. It should not be proposed without the most careful consideration and assessment of all the costs and benefits. The FIS Subcommittee report did not provide the level of detailed consideration that was required to support such a radical proposal.**

26. It could be argued that the FIS report was only a consultation document. At the time, the MRC Council described it as a "valuable starting point for discussion with a wide range of stakeholders—this consultation is therefore the start of an ongoing dialogue. MRC Council intends that the report, and the discussions which now follow, will provide a template for more detailed planning to be developed at the four sites, as well as a backdrop for discussions on future partnership opportunities at other sites".⁵⁰ Although ostensibly for discussion, the report's tone suggested that the consultation was not to be on the necessity of a move, but on the details of negotiation with potential partners. For some, it had an air of certainty about it which proved difficult for MRC to dispel until the proposals were withdrawn following the consultation exercise.

27. The remit of the FIS Subcommittee was focussed very specifically on investment at four sites. This did not allow the committee to consider the relationship between MRC policy in taking forward its strategic goals with investment at these sites. We repeatedly asked MRC what other methods of achieving its goals of increasing its focus on translational and multi-disciplinary research were considered, apart from the move of NIMR. For example, the MRC could have explored the potential for reorganising its funding to establish new research units in hospitals; or for altering its criteria for awarding research grants; or for refocusing of the aims of other institutes, such as the Laboratory for Molecular Biology.

47 Q 221

48 Q 221

49 Q 210

50 FIS Report, http://www.mrc.ac.uk/index/about/about-organisation/about-bodies_and_members/pdf-fis_consultation.pdf-link, para 2.3

Asked whether MRC had put as much effort into considering these other possibilities as it had into investment in institutes, Professor Rothwell said that “I think it probably has in different ways”,⁵¹ but MRC did not provide us with any evidence to support this. In answer to our specific question MRC replied as follows: “The increasing emphasis on translational approaches, in MRC as in most medical research funding agencies in the UK and around the world, gathered momentum in 2002–03 and was articulated in the MRC 10-year Vision published in 2003 following stakeholder consultation. The strategy has had and will continue to have implications across the MRC portfolio, not just at NIMR.”⁵² We find it surprising that MRC is unable to say what these implications might be. They were certainly not considered by the FIS Subcommittee. Indeed, the proposal for the establishment of the FIS Subcommittee made no reference to the strategic review which was the subject of consultation at the same time. Witnesses told us that the Subcommittee’s focus was on the future of NIMR rather than the wider picture of the role of the institute in the reorientation of MRC’s strategy. They did not discuss this latter issue at all. We were told that it was for other committees to consider policy relating to grant awards.⁵³

28. The MRC has a range of policy levers it can use to implement its vision for the future but each has an impact on the others and they need to be used in a co-ordinated way. The review of its physical infrastructure is one such lever, but it appears to have been considered in isolation. There seems to have been a recognition at MRC that the ten year strategy would have an undefined impact on policy. However, MRC would not constitute a coherent attempt to devise a set of policies which, taken together, would ensure that the strategy was implemented. **By asking the FIS committee to focus only on how its facilities might best meet the vision it has established, MRC fuelled concerns in the minds of some there was a preconceived agenda in relation to Mill Hill. More importantly, it did not given the impression that it was taking a holistic and comprehensive approach to realising the vision of the future that it had agreed with its stakeholders.**

Relationship with Quinquennial Review

29. The 2000 quinquennial review of NIMR is cited by many of those opposed to the move of NIMR as evidence that the institute was performing well: the review recommended no strategic shift in its research. The Director of NIMR refers to the last review and states that he recalls no discussion at the time on the need for any additional review.⁵⁴ In its evidence, MRC points to a distinction between the focus of the quinquennial reviews on research strategy and quality for the following five years and the demand for a strategic review of capital investment for the longer term. It also states that the strategic review was needed well in advance of the retirement of the Director in 2006. It describes the ongoing review of NIMR as part of the MRC’s “normal approach to forward planning and strategic review of its intra-mural investment”.⁵⁵ Professor Denton, a member of the Task Force, suggested that quinquennial reviews were “not the perfect vehicle for tackling strategic longer-term

51 Q 219

52 Ev 172, Q5

53 Qs 215–6

54 Ev 178

55 Ev 50

considerations” and argued that a review of the mission, site and size of major institutes every twenty years was vital.⁵⁶ Professor Rothwell told us that quinquennial reviews often look at long-term infrastructure issues, although not in detail, and noted that the 2000 review of NIMR raised some specific concerns on this front.⁵⁷

30. It was clear from the evidence we received that the proposals for NIMR to move were viewed in many quarters as an implicit or indirect attack on the quality of science there. The vast majority of the submissions we received commented on the high quality of the science conducted at Mill Hill; only three raised any criticisms.⁵⁸ In evidence, MRC witnesses told us that the reviews were not about the quality of science.⁵⁹ Professor Blakemore’s private view was given in an email to Professor Tomlinson in March 2004 in support of his argument for a federated option in London for NIMR. He said: “Mill Hill has lost its edge. The work there is good, but not consistently world-class. It’s not as good as LMB [Laboratory of Molecular Biology], yet its “mission”, to the extent that it has one, is very similar to that of LMB. So, it’s hard to justify continuation of the huge slice that it takes from MRC funds without a reorientation in a way that defines a distinct scientific mission and that makes it more effective as a NATIONAL facility”.⁶⁰ Witnesses from the FIS committee confirmed that their job was not to judge the quality of the science there and that this message was repeatedly put across to staff at NIMR.⁶¹ Whether this message got through to staff there and the wider medical research community is open to doubt. We have gained the impression that staff there felt under threat from the start, rather than being engaged in an exciting process of renewal of their valued institute. **The perception that the work of NIMR was under attack by the FIS process was allowed to build up. The inability of MRC to convince the staff at Mill Hill that it valued the work conducted there contributed to the deterioration in relations that was to occur over the ensuing months and represents a regrettable management failure.**

Engagement with NIMR

31. There have been suggestions that NIMR did not engage fully with the FIS process as it continued and thus that the proposals that emerged came as something of a shock. MRC’s evidence states that the principles on which the FIS committee based its work were agreed at its first meeting in November 2002, after which the Directors of the Institutes affected were invited to discuss them with the committee. The FIS committee had a meeting with NIMR staff and with the Director before developing its detailed proposals which were published in April 2003. It is not clear how far the nature of the proposals under development was discussed at this meeting, but NIMR reports that until 31 March 2003 “we were unaware of any proposal to relocate NIMR and, therefore, had not engaged in the development of this proposal”.⁶²

56 Ev 172

57 Q 241

58 Ev 85, 86, 99

59 Qs 24–8

60 Ev 225

61 Q 241–2

62 Ev 175

32. Each of the Directors affected by the FIS report was sent an advance copy of the report on 31 March, with visits by MRC management planned for the following day—two days before publication—to explain and consult. The MRC evidence states that “in the event, the Director chose to circulate the report to all staff at NIMR in advance of the meeting. Heads of Division walked out of the meeting without any engagement. Subsequent engagement with staff, including some meetings between NIMR scientists and FIS members, demonstrated that resistance to the FIS propositions was implacable and led to the decision to take a different approach to engaging NIMR staff in discussions in the Task Force”.⁶³ The NIMR evidence states that the Heads of Division walked out of the meeting when the MRC Chairman “failed to reassure the Heads of Division of the possibility of reversing the FIS recommendation by consultation”.⁶⁴ Subsequently, NIMR reports that it participated fully in the consultation process.

33. Professor Blakemore’s experience was somewhat different. In the visits to Mill Hill that he made in order to meet staff before he took up his position he noted the “unwillingness of Sir John and senior staff to engage with the MRC”.⁶⁵ Members of the FIS committee told us that there was engagement with staff at NIMR, for example, on visits to Mill Hill, but acknowledged that the Director was not consulted until near the end of the process.⁶⁶ Professor North, a member of the FIS committee, told us that when the committee visited NIMR around the time of the publication of the proposals “there did seem to be a perception around that minds had been made up” in spite of committee members’ assurances that this was a draft for consultation.⁶⁷

34. The FIS committee did consider whether to give the institutes involved more information about its developing views before publishing the consultation paper but decided against it. Professor Rothwell thought that this would have been more destabilising and “even more damaging”.⁶⁸ Even in hindsight, she was not convinced that this would have been a better option. We disagree. Earlier informal discussion with NIMR staff may have given the FIS committee some indication of the pitfalls of their proposals which were brought out in the subsequent consultation process and were serious enough to cause MRC to withdraw the proposals.

Conclusion on FIS process

35. We have already discussed how the different rationales cited for the FIS process may have cast doubt on its integrity in the minds of some at the outset. Even without such doubts, **it is essential for any organisation contemplating radical change to engage with those affected from the start in order to persuade them of the case for change and to maintain the morale of the workforce. MRC failed to do this adequately in the case of the FIS Subcommittee and thus passed up the chance to work with NIMR to effect change in a consensual manner. Greater engagement throughout its work may have**

63 Ev 173

64 Ev 176

65 Ev 215

66 Q 195 [Rothwell]

67 Q 198

68 Qs 195 [Rothwell], 202

fostered a more co-operative attitude at NIMR from the start, although there is evidence to suggest that some staff there were intent upon resistance, whatever the merits of the case. By seeming to impose change on a surprised and unconvinced work force, MRC lost the confidence of the staff of its largest institute. This in turn coloured the attitude of NIMR to the future efforts of MRC to consider the issue afresh and contributed significantly to the increasing fragility of their relationship.

4 The Task Force

Establishment

36. MRC states in evidence that the consultation on the FIS proposals demonstrated some concern about the proposals for NIMR and it produced a particularly hostile reaction from staff at NIMR itself. It therefore decided to establish a Task Force on NIMR with a remit to start with a “clean sheet” and to consider and consult upon “a broader set of options for the size and location of NIMR than those originally proposed by the FIS subcommittee”.⁶⁹ **MRC should be given credit for listening to the Forward Investment Strategy consultation and, contrary to fears in some quarters about the imposition of the FIS proposals, reconsidering its options. The establishment of a Task Force with a remit to start again was the right decision.**

Remit

37. The terms of reference of the Task Force, announced in July 2003, were:

To make recommendations to the MRC's Council on the future of the NIMR including:

- The strategic positioning of the NIMR's research within the MRC's overall vision and policy framework for the future of medical research in the UK;
- Consideration of, and consultation on options for the size and location of the NIMR;
- Framing of the business case for future investment in the NIMR; and
- Initial planning for the appointment of a new Director of the NIMR

We have noted that the clean sheet of paper approach in respect of the future of Mill Hill was the right way to go about re-examining the issue. Whilst the potential consideration of all options for the future location did little to stabilise the situation, it nonetheless sent an important message that there was still a possibility of NIMR remaining at Mill Hill, provided that it stood up to comparison of other options by the distinguished panel of scientists established to consider the issue afresh.

Composition

38. The Task Force was chaired by the MRC Chief Executive, Professor Colin Blakemore, and consisted of nine other members plus an observer. Membership was as follows:

Professor Alan Bernstein, President, Canadian Institutes of Health Research

Professor Kay Davies, Professor of Anatomy and Honorary Director, MRC Functional Genetics Unit, University of Oxford

Professor Richard Denton, Department of Biochemistry, University of Bristol

Professor Richard Flavell, Chairman, Section of Immunobiology, Howard Hughes Institute, Yale University School of Medicine

Steve Gamblin, NIMR

Dr Robin Lovell-Badge, Head of Genetics, NIMR

Dr Sir Paul Nurse, President, Rockefeller University, NY

Professor Stephen Tomlinson, Provost, Wales College of Medicine, biology, Life Sciences and Deputy Vice-Chancellor, Cardiff University

Dr Peter Gruss, Director, Max Planck Institute for Biophysical Chemistry

Dr Alison Spaul from the Department of Health in the Scottish Executive sat on the Task Force as an Observer.

39. The membership was determined jointly by MRC and NIMR. In addition to the two NIMR staff on the Task Force (Dr Lovell-Badge and Dr Gamblin), NIMR was asked to nominate three other members (Sir Paul Nurse, Professor Flavell and Dr Gruss). Dr Peter Gruss resigned from the Task Force in March 2003 due to the pressure of other commitments. The MRC asked two members of its Council to serve on the Task Force (Professor Davies and Professor Denton) and nominated two other members (Professor Tomlinson and Professor Bernstein). There were therefore five nominees or representatives from “each side”, who provided a broad range of experience and expertise from different disciplines and also an international perspective. This was a sensible way of assembling a Task Force. MRC had learned the lessons of the FIS Subcommittee by including Mill Hill representatives in the review and had wisely sought to guarantee an international and independent element with the non-UK-based scientists.

Role of NIMR members

40. All members of the Task Force were expected to approach their work with an open mind and to base their views on the evidence that was gathered. However, those from the MRC and from NIMR found themselves in a potentially difficult position given the antagonism that the initial proposals generated and the firm opposition of staff at Mill Hill. The position of the Chairman is discussed in paragraphs 42–46 below. The other MRC members were not there to represent any MRC position and, whilst their views tended to lean towards those of the Chairman on issues of controversy, there is no suggestion that they were anything other than fully engaged members of the group giving their independent professional views.

41. The two NIMR members, in addition to their role as independent members of the Task Force, had a second role of keeping NIMR staff informed about the workings and conclusions of the Task Force.⁷⁰ They were not there to represent or convey the views of NIMR management back to the Task Force, but they may have felt an underlying pressure to reflect the concerns of those with whom they worked. Their position was described by Professor Flavell as “... impossible. They were being squeezed from both directions. I am

sure that they had pressure from their colleagues in the sense that there was the expectation that they were to present their views and they were getting pressure from Colin in the other direction”.⁷¹ Professor Blakemore also refers to the “impossible position” the two NIMR members were put in, having to play an open role in the Task Force yet also acting, he says, as agents for the opinion of Sir John Skehel.⁷² He recalls that they “expressed their own frustration in this dual role at several points in discussion”.⁷³ The inherent difficulty of their position was perhaps most obviously exposed in the exchanges between Task Force members on the wording of its final meeting summary and the report which followed its final meeting. This is discussed further in paragraphs 65–81. However, it is clear from the email correspondence that both members engaged fully with the process and were prepared with the rest of the Task Force to work to achieve a consensus based upon the evidence available to them. Professor Davies and Professor Tomlinson both praised the professional way in which they behaved.⁷⁴ Professor Denton believed that the two NIMR members were in “an increasingly difficult position and probably came under great pressure from their colleagues and Director to defend NIMR as it is currently set up”.⁷⁵ We discuss this pressure in paragraphs 82–87 below. **The evidence we have seen suggests that both Dr Lovell-Badge and Dr Gamblin participated in the Task Force with objectivity and professionalism and handled a difficult situation very well.**

Role of the Chairman and Task force secretariat

42. The role of Chairman of the Task Force was not one that Professor Blakemore chose for himself. He told us that the MRC Council invited him and his predecessor to co-chair the Task Force and that the latter had retired by the time the first meeting took place. He said that “I was absolutely sure that it was appropriate that the Chief Executive should be present during the discussions, since they were of such enormous strategic importance for MRC”. At the first meeting, and with the permission of the Task Force, he asked consultants to facilitate the meetings “so as to liberate me from the Chairman role and allow me to participate fully in the discussions”.⁷⁶ Professor Blakemore points out that the Task Force was not intended to be a totally independent external inquiry into NIMR, but a means of taking forward the FIS proposals in a more open process.⁷⁷ He reports that he actually chaired “rather little” of the meetings. MRC states that “In practice the work was shared between the chair, the secretariat and the consultants who worked interchangeably on occasions—this was essential in progressing the volume of business and in making optimal use of members’ time”.⁷⁸ The consultants confirmed that Professor Blakemore frequently handed over the Chair to the consultants in order that he could participate fully in discussions.⁷⁹

71 Q168

72 Ev 213

73 Ev 215

74 Q 297

75 Ev 170

76 Q 10

77 Ev 216

78 Ev 172

79 Memorandum from consultants; not printed

43. The fact that Professor Blakemore successfully sought to hand over some of the responsibilities of chairing the Task Force to consultants serves to indicate that the workload involved was far too great for someone simultaneously tasked with running the MRC and also that he was not entirely comfortable with the situation in which he found himself. He himself describes it as “complex and extremely difficult”.⁸⁰ Indeed, he expressed his reservations about chairing the Task Force at its first meeting.⁸¹ Sir Paul Nurse said that “the Chairman had a double role and I think that is an extremely difficult role to manage”.⁸² Sir Paul personally drew the lesson from the Task Force process that in major investigations the CEO should be kept separate and the Task Force should report to him.⁸³ Professor Tomlinson said about this issue, “I think if we were to start again, the question would have to be asked”.⁸⁴

44. The position of the Chairman was awkward on a number of fronts. First, he faced the dual responsibilities of being an independently minded member of the Task Force tasked with looking again at an issue on which MRC had been forced to step back, whilst at the same time being CEO of the organisation as a whole. He may have been new to the post and thus not party to any of the FIS process, but he was nonetheless a Chairman with considerable power and influence over MRC and its employees. Indeed, his position as employer of two of the Task Force members also put this relationship on a different footing from that with the other members of the Task Force. Whilst the two NIMR members were far from reticent in disagreeing with and even criticising the Chairman on occasion, the professional relationship between them was a factor. Likewise, the two MRC Council members may have felt more constrained in expressing their views than they would with a completely independent Chairman. Finally, Professor Blakemore was both Chairman of the Task Force, with the associated responsibilities of driving the work forward and securing a consensus, and also at times, an ordinary participating member seeking, like others, to persuade colleagues of his viewpoint and interpretation of the evidence presented. It would have been easier for him and other members of the Task Force if he had been able to act as an ordinary member of the Task Force and there had been an independent chairman with the job of engineering a consensus. The appointment of an independent chairman would also have served to increase confidence in the process without forfeiting the overall control of the process that MRC rightly felt it needed to have. Senior management could have been strongly represented on the Task Force in another way. **Given what had gone before with the FIS Subcommittee, it was naive of the MRC Council not to foresee the dangers of asking its Chief Executive to chair a Task Force seeking to undertake a fresh and open-minded review.**

45. In terms of the way Professor Blakemore chaired the actual meetings of the Task Force, we heard few complaints. Professor Tomlinson and Professor Davies agreed that he behaved with integrity and did not exert undue pressure.⁸⁵ Sir Paul Nurse said that “I thought he chaired the meetings well and reasonably fairly. He did express his opinions but

80 Ev 213

81 Ev 216

82 Q 142

83 Qs 142, 166

84 Q 294

85 Qs 266–7

I felt that was okay”.⁸⁶ Professor Denton thought that he carried out the “extremely challenging” role of Chairman “rather well”. Professor Davies noted that it was the consultants who produced the summaries for agreement at the end of the meetings, so they were in no way steered by the Chairman.⁸⁷ Professor Blakemore sought to the chair the meetings in a dispassionate way and said that he expressed his views no more forcefully than anyone else.⁸⁸ **We conclude that, as far as we can tell, Professor Blakemore handled the meetings of the Task Force with professionalism, objectivity and competence.** It was his role in between meetings that was the cause of some concern among some other members of the Task Force, as is discussed in paragraphs 50–52 below.

46. In addition to recruiting consultants to help with the work, the Task Force was also served by a member of MRC’s staff as the secretariat. Aside from chairing some parts of meetings, the consultants were responsible for conducting the various opinion surveys that informed the work of the Task Force and for interviewing a selection of NIMR staff and others. Although they facilitated many of the early conference calls between Task Force members, after the call of 2 July their role was “very different” and they only listened in to parts of subsequent calls.⁸⁹ They were not party to much of the email correspondence between meetings. The consultants drafted the summary of the fifth meeting for discussion at the end of the same meeting but the MRC secretariat was responsible for subsequently finalising this text and undertook the bulk of the work in drafting the final report. Most witnesses from the Task Force confirmed the value of the consultants’ role and praised their contribution.⁹⁰ Professor Denton was “initially sceptical” about the inclusion of consultants but believed that, without them, the work of the Task Force could not have been completed in the time that it was.⁹¹ The only criticisms of their role came from Dr Gamblin, who blamed the consultants for a “failure to keep the process focussed on the key objectives”⁹² and from a head of division at NIMR, Professor Dodson. He referred to the “limited knowledge that consultants have about MRC culture” and suggested that their use contributed to the lack of direct productive contact between the MRC and NIMR”.⁹³ Given the suspicions at NIMR about the motives of MRC, we fully understand why Professor Blakemore sought the consent of the Task Force for enlisting the help of independent consultants to help him perform his role. The choice of a largely independent secretariat was a politically astute, if expensive, move under the circumstances. We have no criticisms of the role of the consultants and secretariat to the Task Force.

Working methods and transparency

47. The Task Force held five meetings in total, between November 2003 and June 2004. No verbatim record of the meetings was kept and no formal minutes were taken. Instead, after each meeting a summary of its proceedings and any decisions taken was agreed between

86 Q140

87 Q 293 [Davies]

88 Ev 235, email 158

89 Memorandum from consultants; not printed

90 Q 170, Q 293

91 Ev 170

92 Ev 135

93 Ev 127

the members either during or after the meetings and was subsequently published on the MRC website. Between meetings, there was email correspondence between the Task Force members, partly on the wording of these summaries but also more generally on the discussions at the meetings and the direction of their work. There were also conference calls involving as many members of the Task Force as were able to attend, again, mainly at the end of the process to agree the wording of the Task Force's final summary and report. It was agreed at the outset that email correspondence between Task Force members would be posted on the MRC website unless it was specifically marked confidential. As is evident from the MRC website, there was a significant amount of confidential email traffic. With the permission of the authors, we have placed this in the Record Office so that a fuller record of the Task Force's proceedings can be seen. We hope that this will serve to provide a more informed view for those who wish to study the decision-making process. The nature of the disagreements within the Task Force at the end of the process is already well known, and much has already been made public in published emails by Task Force members and statements by NIMR Heads of Division on its website. As far as we are aware, only one non-confidential email, from Dr Lovell-Badge to Professor Blakemore, was deliberately not published on the website by the MRC secretariat after advice over its contents was taken from the MRC's legal adviser on personnel matters.⁹⁴

48. We believe the way in which the Task Force set about conducting its business was reasonable. Its members were all in busy full time jobs at the time and some were working outside the UK. Time constraints in meetings and developments between meetings meant that there were certain issues which needed to be addressed outside the formal meetings. The practical difficulties involved in holding meetings and even conference calls meant that email correspondence was the only practical way to operate in what was acknowledged by Professor Tomlinson to be a continual process rather than simply five separate meetings.⁹⁵ Professor Denton says that the communication difficulties between meetings were largely the result of members having other commitments.⁹⁶ For the most part, these arrangements, though far from ideal, worked well enough. It was only after the final meeting that, as we discuss later, the limitations of remote meetings began to be tested and the practical difficulties of organising another meeting at short notice became significant to the work of the Task Force.⁹⁷

49. The publication of this email traffic is, for a task force of this sort, unusual if not unprecedented. For some of those involved in the process, the process was as open as it could have been. Professor Davies described it as a "model of transparency".⁹⁸ Given the ill-feeling and mistrust which followed the FIS Committee's proposals, the MRC was right to make the work of the Task Force as transparent as possible. **We believe that the Task Force was sensible in agreeing and publishing a summary after each meeting. The proceedings of the Task Force were more open and transparent than those of many similar bodies and members should be commended for adopting this approach.**

94 Ev 168. This email has not been made available in the Record Office.

95 Q 290

96 Ev 170

97 See paras 65-90 below.

98 Q 298

50. The failure of the Task Force to have formal minutes taken and agreed has been criticised in some quarters. One head of division at NIMR described this as a “disaster for NIMR:MRC relations” and said that this must have contributed to the disputes over what had been agreed and subsequent reports from the Task Force.⁹⁹ The absence of a full record was most keenly felt when the consensus of the Task Force disintegrated following the final meeting on the issue of whether the Mill Hill site remained an active option when the exact words and views of every member needed to be established in order for the report to reflect the majority view of the group.¹⁰⁰ The secretary to the Task Force said in evidence to us that “No doubt a verbatim record would have been helpful in resolving current differences of recollection about Task Force meetings. But anything short of a verbatim record (for example, traditional minutes) would have taken considerable time and effort to agree and publish, and would have been unlikely to add value to the process”.¹⁰¹ We tend to agree. It is easy with hindsight to criticise the failure to keep detailed minutes of the meetings. The Committee was seeking to work by consensus to achieve an end product. It also sought to keep a record of what it had agreed and to inform the public of this by carefully agreeing at the meeting and publishing afterwards a summary of each meeting. There was no expectation at the outset that there would be any need for a verbatim record of each member’s contribution to the continuing discussions, nor was there much indication as the Task Force progressed that there was any need for it. The problems it began to experience were when agreements began to be unpicked, as we discuss in paragraphs 82–87. It does not seem to us that the keeping of formal minutes in meetings would have prevented this happening.

Activity outside meetings

51. In addition to the published material, there was also activity between meetings that remained private, either in the form of bilateral email correspondence or telephone calls. This level of contact between meetings was, for Sir Paul Nurse and Professor Davies, higher than they might normally expect for such committees.¹⁰² Dr Lovell-Badge said that “I do not know how he [Professor Blakemore] treated the other TF members, but I understand that such phone calls, often late at night and at weekends, were not uncommon”.¹⁰³ Professor Blakemore acknowledges that there was a greater interchange between members than is usual in such committees but states that there was “nothing sinister” in this—rather it was a necessary attempt to try to achieve or preserve consensus in a sometimes divided group.¹⁰⁴

52. It is not unreasonable for members of a committee with such a delicate and important task in wishing to retain a degree of confidentiality: indeed, some may feel that full and frank discussion demand it. In fact, it was the very transparency of the process that enabled interested parties to respond to and lobby against the Task Force’s conclusions as they were being developed. It is the role of the Chairman to try to find consensus and this, in practice,

99 Ev 128

100 See paras 82-87 below.

101 Ev 168

102 Q 133

103 Ev 178

104 Ev 215

can necessitate a certain amount of private discussion in the corridors and on the telephone. There is not necessarily anything untoward in such activity. As Professor Tomlinson said “Just because there was a great deal of email correspondence and even telephone calls does not mean that there is a conspiracy; it is the Task Force trying to inform itself”.¹⁰⁵ Members of the Task Force were aware of such bilateral discussions taking place. Sir Paul Nurse told us that “It was more these outside discussions which made me more concerned because I do not know what else was going on in the one-to-one discussions. I always think in difficult situations like this you are best having more group meetings because one-to-one conversations can be so easily misinterpreted”.¹⁰⁶ There comes a point at which the scale of the outside-meeting contacts serves to undermine the transparency of the process and damage trust between members. Whether this point was reached in the minds of some Task Force members we cannot say. However, we note that there was never any complaint, or indeed discussion, in a meeting of the way in which the business of the Task Force was being conducted.¹⁰⁷

The work of the Task Force

53. We did not seek in our short inquiry to replicate the work of the panel of distinguished scientists that served on the Task Force, but merely to satisfy ourselves that proper consideration was given to all aspects of its remit and that the conclusions that it reached were those agreed by its members.

Consideration of costs

54. It was within the remit of the Task Force to “frame the business case” for future investment in NIMR. Many witnesses speculate about the high costs of a move to London and complain that, for example, “the decision to exclude Mill Hill as the status quo option appears to have been made without comparing the relative costs and benefits of staying at Mill Hill with those of moving to central London”.¹⁰⁸ The Task Force commissioned a building consultant to estimate the costs of upgrading the existing facilities at Mill Hill against which to compare the bids. It produced a range of options, depending on the extent of refurbishment, although we note that NIMR disputes the extent of refurbishment required.¹⁰⁹

55. The original estimates from the two London bidders to host the NIMR, University College, London (UCL) and Kings College, London (KCL) were of the order of £115 to £125 million. An additional £5 million a year is estimated to fall to the MRC’s resource budget as a result of the proposed relocation, but the possibility of other non-MRC capital contributions might offset these costs. The Task Force noted that the UCL bid was “financially somewhat less favourable” for the MRC but would give better access to a critical mass of very high quality biomedical research and physical sciences. The Task Force referred to additional staff costs associated with a move to London and the possible

105 Q 289

106 Q 140

107 Q 137

108 Ev 71

109 Ev 173

savings stemming from shared services but it acknowledges that it was not able to conduct a detailed analysis of the proposed options, so no definitive estimate of costs could be made.¹¹⁰

56. The two bidders, King's College and UCL, were asked to submit the *science* case for hosting NIMR for consideration by the MRC Council on 15 December. Neither submission contained detailed estimates of the costs of constructing the new facilities nor reliable information on how much will be provided by the university or by other sources. The MRC subsequently received some slightly more detailed information on the finances from the bidders than is contained in their original confidential submissions but the MRC Council, at its meeting on 15 December, nevertheless asked for further information from both bidders. It said that "neither yet fully met the vision for NIMR that Council sought".¹¹¹ This further information will be considered at its meeting in February 2005. The MRC evidence states that a final decision will be based on the FIS principles, one of which relates to added value/opportunity cost and another relates to the need to retain financial flexibility to capitalise on new scientific opportunities.¹¹²

57. Dr Lovell-Badge states in evidence that the Task Force was given mixed messages about the financial constraints within which they were working: they were told that the Government could always be persuaded to provide the money if the case was good but also that there could be no increase in current expenditure from MRC.¹¹³ MRC acknowledges that "the capital expenditure required is almost certainly greater than we can fully finance from our own resources and that the final proposal will need to go forward to RCUK/OST as an application to the Large Facilities Fund".¹¹⁴ Professor Blakemore said that he had had informal discussions with OST over the issue but that no guarantees had been made about the availability of future funding.¹¹⁵

58. In his evidence to us, Dr Gamblin from NIMR states that "The likely financial implications of the two central London options that appeared in the final Task Force report were only available to the Task Force a matter of days before the completion deadline and were added to the report rather than being a part of the decision making process".¹¹⁶ During the discussions relating to the final report of the Task Force, Professor Davies highlighted the need to develop the financial cases of the London options further in order to make a comparison with Mill Hill.¹¹⁷ Professor Flavell and Sir Paul Nurse told us that the Task Force "did not do a proper job on costings", largely because they did not have sufficient information before them. Professor Tomlinson agreed that there were no full financial cases for the Task Force to consider.¹¹⁸ Professor Blakemore said that the Task

110 Medical Research Council Task Force on NIMR, *The Future of the MRC National Institute for Medical Research*, 22 July 2004. http://www.mrc.ac.uk/pdf-nimr_taskforce-final_rep.pdf, Chapter 6

111 http://www.mrc.ac.uk/pdf-nimr_update_16_dec_04.pdf

112 Ev 52

113 Ev 146

114 Ev 52

115 Ev 173

116 Ev 90

117 http://www.mrc.ac.uk/pdf-nimr_taskforce_08july04.pdf

118 Q 345

Force did have an indication of the financial contributions that could be made by the two London bidders along with estimates of the likely value of the Mill Hill site and the ability of MRC to make a capital contribution towards a renewed institute. He also acknowledged that the Task Force could not perform a comprehensive analysis of costs because a full business appraisal had not been drawn up.¹¹⁹

59. As we have argued earlier in this Report, the financial aspects of the proposed move must be an important consideration. We are satisfied that the Task Force attempted to collate appropriate financial information and to compare future costs at Mill Hill with those at the proposed London sites, as the information materialised. It was also right to stress the need for this information to be used in a comparison of the London bids with Mill Hill. As Task Force members pointed out, there was much detailed financial information that was not available to them as the London bids were still in the process of being compiled. This information, as far we can gather, is still being assembled. We are not yet aware of how much capital funding of their own the two bidders might be able to bring to the table. There was and is also uncertainty over whether the proceeds of any sale of the Mill Hill site will be available for MRC to use and over whether OST will be willing to provide the additional capital funding required from the Large Facilities Fund.¹²⁰ We note that the Task Force was content to make a recommendation in principle in favour of a co-located site in London without having the full information before it. We believe that such information must be included in any comparison of the London bids with the base case put forward by NIMR. **We recommend that, before reaching any final decision on the future location of NIMR, the MRC Council satisfies itself that it has given full consideration to the availability of funds from all potential sources.**

Consideration of the Mill Hill option

60. In its first three meetings the Task Force considered the range of options available for NIMR and drew on the experiences of institutes abroad to consider different models of funding of research. It reached a consensus that NIMR should remain intact as an institution in the London area with a focus on translational research. The Task Force concluded that only a London location could guarantee an excellent initial science base for the institute. Some witnesses argue in favour of the break up of NIMR and the relocation of its facilities and resources at different university/hospital sites. This “virtual NIMR” option was considered and rejected by the Task Force on the grounds that it was desirable to maintain a critical mass at one site. It agreed that the options of co-location in central London and a reconfigured Mill Hill site would be explored and it proceeded on this basis.

61. In the evidence we received there are arguments on both sides about the impact that a central London location would have on recruitment. Some witnesses point to the magnetic value of London for top class scientists while others emphasise the adverse impact that high costs of living might have. The Task Force concluded that, on balance, a London location should benefit recruitment, although there is little evidence that either NIMR or MRC have attempted any specific analysis of this issue.

119 Ev 221

120 Ev 172

62. Much of the opposition to a central London option focuses on the difficulties of replicating the secure and first class animal facilities that exist at Mill Hill and point to the recent difficulties experienced at Oxford and Cambridge with protestors. The Task Force report states that the provision of suitable animal facilities will be “a major project in its own right” and that “it is possible that insufficient account has been taken of the 9000m² that current animal facilities occupy at Mill Hill”.¹²¹ Another weakness cited is the need to build on the new site a new high level Category 4 isolation facility for dangerous pathogens needed by NIMR, with all the attendant security implications and costs. The re-creation of such facilities in central London is described by one witness from Imperial College as “illogical, expensive and wasteful”.¹²² Others point to the flexibility on the Mill Hill site for future expansion of these facilities that would not exist on a central London site.

63. We have not gone over the arguments themselves but sought to establish whether the Task Force gave serious and comprehensive consideration to the option of NIMR remaining at Mill Hill. In a statement to the Committee signed by all members of the Task Force except Dr Lovell-Badge and Dr Gamblin said that “the views of staff at NIMR and the proposals for the Mill Hill site were fully considered”.¹²³ Dr Gamblin argued in evidence that the Mill Hill option was never fully considered by the Task Force and that the statement put out by the Task Force was therefore wrong.¹²⁴ Other Task Force members disagreed. We found persuasive the view of Sir Paul Nurse, one of the NIMR nominees to serve on the Task Force, who told us that “I do think Mill Hill was considered as an option in a reasonable way”.¹²⁵ Professor Davies said in the email traffic after the last meeting that a careful examination of the Mill Hill option should be made but that “this is not the job of the current TF”.¹²⁶ We find this statement odd: the job of the Task Force was to start again with a clean sheet of paper and devoted a considerable amount of time to looking at Mill Hill. If Mill Hill was never in the running as a long term option we are surprised that it was considered at all, other than as a point of comparison. Such confusion about the role of the Task Force may have served to fuel the misinterpretation that was to arise following the publishing of its conclusions.¹²⁷

64. Mill Hill representatives were given the opportunity to present their case to the Task Force. Sir John Skehel, after initially seeking to serve on the Task Force himself, had his request to attend the parts of meetings not relevant to the appointment of his successor granted, and he attended most of its meetings. He presented the basis of the enhanced base case at Mill Hill to the final meeting of the Task Force on 21 June. Other presentations were made by Heads of Division at NIMR and open discussion meetings and workshops with staff were also held. Members of the Task Force reported that both NIMR members were helpful in providing data, information and a perspective from Mill Hill to the discussions.¹²⁸ The view of Professor Blakemore was that “overall, the Mill Hill site received

121 Medical Research Council Task Force on NIMR, *The Future of the MRC National Institute for Medical Research*, 22 July 2004. http://www.mrc.ac.uk/pdf-nimr_taskforce-final_rep.pdf

122 Ev 70

123 Ev 177

124 Q 93

125 Q 158

126 http://www.mrc.ac.uk/pdf-nimr_taskforce_07july04.pdf

127 See paras 82-87 below.

128 Q Davies/Tomlinson

enormously more attention from the Task Force than any other option”.¹²⁹ **We conclude that the Task Force went about its decision making on a future location for NIMR in a rational and coherent manner and are satisfied that it gave due consideration to the benefits of NIMR remaining at Mill Hill for the long term.** We deal with the Task Force’s consideration of Mill Hill as a fall back position in paragraphs 82–87 below.

Concluding stages of Task Force

65. We discuss here in some detail the closing stages of the Task Force’s work, largely because the exchanges during this time led to the break down in relations between MRC and NIMR and were central to the allegations of coercion we explore in paragraphs 92–111. Box 1 indicates the significant dates and events during this period.

Box 1

FINAL DELIBERATIONS OF THE TASK FORCE: JUNE–JULY 2004

Date	Event
Sunday 21 June	Fifth and final meeting of Task Force (TF)
Friday 25 June	Conference call which agreed wording of summary of Fifth meeting of TF
Monday 28 June	17.00: deadline set for receipt of any proposed amendments to draft summary
Monday 28 June	23.30: Phone conversation between Blakemore and Lovell-Badge
Wednesday 30 June	Publication of summary of Fifth meeting of TF
Friday 2 July	Conference call to discuss draft report
Monday 12 July	Conference call to discuss draft report
Thursday 15 July	Conference call to discuss draft report
Monday 19 July	Final conference call to agree wording of draft report
Wednesday 21 July	“First thing”: deadline for “minor” amendments to draft report
Wednesday 21 July	12.05 pm: Substantive amendments sent to MRC secretariat by Dr Gamblin
Thursday 22 July	Distribution of final TF Report
Thursday 29 July	MRC Council meeting to consider Task Force report
Friday 30 July	Publication of Task Force report and MRC press notice

Final meeting and aftermath

Agreement of the meeting summary

66. At its final meeting on 21 June the Task Force apparently reached a consensus on the content of its conclusions and agreed the wording of the meeting summary. There was an evident sense of achievement and relief after this meeting. Professor Tomlinson referred to the sense of excitement that Task Force members felt about the consensus that had been achieved.¹³⁰ It is apparent from the email correspondence that members of the Task Force, including the Chairman, believed in the immediate aftermath of the meeting that their main job had been completed successfully. **It was, given the starting positions of Task Force members and the disagreements during its proceedings, a commendable achievement to reach a consensus and agree unanimously on a set of conclusions.**

67. It was only after the final meeting of the Task Force that the NIMR representatives began to question exactly what had been agreed. The conclusions document was re-circulated to members after some changes had been made to reflect the concerns of the Director of the Clinical Sciences Centre about the distinctiveness of the two institutes' missions. The draft from the meeting had been forwarded to him for information. Dr Lovell-Badge replied to this email on 23 June, suggesting further small but significant changes that introduced greater conditionality about the wording relating to the move to London.¹³¹ After further exchanges, the final wording of the text was agreed during the conference call on Friday 25 June, in which both Dr Lovell-Badge and Dr Gamblin participated.¹³² It was then published on the MRC website on 30 June as the "Conclusions of the Fifth Task Force Meeting". This summary recommends that:

"the MRC take forward its partnership negotiations with two institutions: King's College and University College (bearing in mind the unanimous support for a single site). As any move into central London would take 5–10 years to accomplish, the Task Force recommends that the MRC move with all speed to begin bolstering the NIMR's renewed vision at Mill Hill today".¹³³

68. The document sets out a number of recommendations for NIMR to take towards strengthening its delivery against its new vision. It also states that:

"it will be essential to develop a partnership agreement for this move that is more attractive than would be possible between a university and NIMR at Mill Hill".¹³⁴

It made no mention of how any such a judgement might be made nor, crucially, of what would happen in the event of any partnership agreement being less favourable than a university and NIMR at Mill Hill.

69. At 12.53pm on Monday 28 June Dr Lovell-Badge emailed the Task Force to suggest that the wording of the summary that had been agreed "did not make sufficiently clear that Mill Hill remained a valid option to which the other bids have to be compared".¹³⁵ Professor Blakemore then emailed the Task Force, urging others on the Task Force to

130 Q 292

131 http://www.mrc.ac.uk/pdf-nimr_taskforce_22june04b.pdf

132 http://www.mrc.ac.uk/pdf-nimr_taskforce_22june04b.pdf

133 Conclusions of the Fifth Task Force meeting on 21 June, http://www.mrc.ac.uk/pdf-nimr_taskforce_mtg5_rep.pdf

134 As above

135 Ev 228, email61,

dissuade Dr Lovell-Badge from pursuing these changes. He explained that he thought that Sir John Skehel had been “putting pressure on Robin” and that any further changes at this stage would be embarrassing to him (Blakemore) because he had already circulated the draft conclusions to some of those who had made presentations to the Task Force and to OST and the MRC Chairman in advance of the planned distribution of the summary later that day, 28 June.¹³⁶

70. Professor Blakemore appealed to Dr Lovell-Badge to withdraw his proposed amendments because they would misrepresent the views of the Task Force. If he was unwilling to do so, Professor Blakemore suggested that the summary should be issued as planned but with the wording changed to indicate that it was a majority view. Professor Flavell emailed the group on 28 June to express his preference that Mill Hill should be included as a fall back option in order to strengthen the MRC’s negotiating position with the two London bidders, and that this fall back position should be made clear in public. This plea for clarity was repeated in a further email from Professor Flavell which did not reach the Task Force until after the summary had been finalised on 29 June. Professor Tomlinson and Professor Denton did not agree to any changes and supported the issuing of the statement as drafted.

71. Professor Blakemore sought to contact Dr Lovell-Badge during the day on 28 June but without success. Eventually they spoke by telephone late that evening. This is the conversation in which Dr Lovell-Badge alleges that Professor Blakemore attempted to coerce him into agreeing the summary. We discuss this specific allegation in paragraphs 92–101. After this conversation Professor Blakemore emailed the Task Force to ask if they wished to stick with the summary that had been agreed. He also indicated, given the hostility he had experienced, that it might be more constructive for someone else to take forward negotiations with Dr Lovell-Badge on behalf of the Task Force.¹³⁷

72. The following morning Dr Lovell-Badge confirmed to the group that he was content to agree to the wording of the summary, on the understanding that “the Institute should move only if a highly attractive partnership can be negotiated, but that every effort will be made to obtain the best bids from Kings and UCL”.¹³⁸ The summary report was then distributed to interested parties in Government later that evening (replacing the earlier version sent) and published on the MRC website the following day.

Reasons for late objections

73. Dr Lovell-Badge explained that the delay in communicating his objections was due to the fact that it emerged that “at least four of the people who left the [final] Task Force meeting were clearly under the belief that Mill Hill was on the table, it was an option. It was only subsequently that it became clear, from conversations with Colin Blakemore and others, that in his view it was not an option, and this was against the decision that we agreed on the day”.¹³⁹ Dr Gamblin confirmed his view that the recommendation of the

¹³⁶ Ev 229, email 62,

¹³⁷ Ev 232, email 76,

¹³⁸ http://www.mrc.ac.uk/pdf-nimr_taskforce_22june04b.pdf

¹³⁹ Q 103

Task Force was conditional on the central London options providing a better scientific environment than Mill Hill.¹⁴⁰ Another view is that the objections followed discussions after the meetings between the two Mill Hill representatives and NIMR management. This we discuss further in paragraphs 84–87 below.

Discussions in final Task Force meeting

74. The proceedings of the final Task Force meeting are the subject of some dispute. According to NIMR evidence, during this meeting five of the seven members present declared their preferences for a single site either at Mill Hill or in central London (Nurse, Flavell, Lovell-Badge, Gamblin and Tomlinson) but following subsequent persuasion five out of nine Task Force members excluded the Mill Hill site as an option (Blakemore, Bernstein, Denton, Tomlinson and Davies).¹⁴¹ Professor Flavell gave his view that five of the seven there thought that Mill Hill was a viable option.¹⁴² Professor Blakemore rejects the assertion by Dr Gamblin that five of the seven present at the final meeting “thought that the Mill Hill site was a potential long-term option”.¹⁴³ It should be noted that Sir Paul was not in favour of Mill Hill being considered as a long term option, as we see below. He suggested at the final meeting that the Task Force could simply record the voting but argued that this might weaken the impact of an otherwise unanimous report.¹⁴⁴ According to Dr Lovell-Badge, Professor Blakemore ruled that Mill Hill could not be considered an option due to the insufficient discussion of the issue at the meeting. In a subsequent email to Professor Blakemore he referred to this as “a notable failure of your chairmanship ... This was to avoid a proper and full discussion of the Mill Hill bid at the 5th meeting”.¹⁴⁵ Professor Blakemore points out that the consultants, rather than he, were chairing the meeting at the time the bids were considered and that each one was discussed for “roughly the same (short) amount of time”.¹⁴⁶ He states that the general discussion of the issue of the Mill Hill option was terminated by the remark by Sir Paul Nurse that “It’s obvious that Mill Hill is not an option in the long run”.¹⁴⁷ Sir Paul confirmed to us that he had made this remark but said that he later argued for the maintenance of Mill Hill as a fall back position.¹⁴⁸ Dr Lovell-Badge, for one, did not interpret this comment by Sir Paul to mean that Mill Hill was no longer an option on the table.”¹⁴⁹

75. The failure to give proper consideration to the Mill Hill option at the last meeting was the major criticism from NIMR about the work of the Task Force. It is clear that the precise status of the Mill Hill option was not discussed at the fifth meeting, an omission which Sir Paul Nurse and Professor Flavell regarded as “big error”.¹⁵⁰ Professor Blakemore

140 Q 96

141 Ev 175

142 Q 150

143 Ev 136

144 http://www.mrc.ac.uk/pdf-nimr_taskforce_07july04.pdf

145 Ev 215

146 Ev 217

147 Ev 217

148 Q 148

149 http://www.mrc.ac.uk/pdf-nimr_taskforce_09july04.pdf

150 Q 149

acknowledged that the Task Force did not discuss the question explicitly and “Perhaps that was an omission on our part, but I think that it reflected our general enthusiasm for the key recommendation ...”.¹⁵¹ **At the fifth meeting the Task Force seemed to avoid resolution of the status of Mill Hill as an “active” third option, as a fall back option or neither. In retrospect, this was a major failing of the Task Force as a whole, and in particular of those present at the last meeting. Whilst the focus on the preferred options was understandable, it was remiss of the Task Force not to consider the status of Mill Hill as an option and to leave the position unclear. This failing led to different interpretations of the conclusions of the Task Force and undermined the rest of the process.**

Final report of the Task Force

76. Following the publication of the summary of the final meeting, the Task Force then went on to work on its full final report. A sub-committee of Task Force members, including Dr Lovell-Badge and chaired by Professor Blakemore, was established with the intention that it would produce a report that could be agreed and sent to the MRC Council by 19 July.¹⁵²

77. During this email debate Task Force members discussed the status of the Mill Hill option. Professor Blakemore and other members were opposed to the fall back option but Professor Blakemore did not seem keen to be explicit on this point: “Given the fact that we have said that Mill Hill is doing very good work, and that bids have to be judged against what is already at Mill Hill, they might see Mill Hill as the ‘fall back’. But I don’t think that we are in a position to give them a clear steer on this”.¹⁵³ Another concern was that staff at Mill Hill would not engage fully in developing links with the London bidders if there was still a prospect of staying at Mill Hill. After some further exchanges Professor Blakemore identified that the Task Force was split 5–4 against specifying that Mill Hill was a fall back option. He argued in favour of trying to reach a consensus instead of producing a split report, which would carry less weight with Council.¹⁵⁴

78. In view of the unresolved disagreement, the Chairman circulated a draft paragraph explaining that, in the time available, agreement had not been reached on the status of the Mill Hill option. This draft was discussed and agreed during a conference call on 15 July.¹⁵⁵ A final conference call, to agree the whole report, was arranged for 19 July. During this call, participated in by seven Task Force members, including the two NIMR members, the wording of the final report was agreed. The deadline for any further corrections to the text was set for “first thing” on the morning of Wednesday 21 July. It was intended to circulate the report to members of the MRC Council in time for its meeting on 29 July.

79. At 5pm on 21 July, after the “first thing” deadline, a large number of substantive amendments were received from Dr Gamblin by the secretariat.¹⁵⁶ In the view of Professor

151 http://www.mrc.ac.uk/pdf-nimr_taskforce_07july04.pdf

152 The other members were Sir Paul Nurse and Professor Denton; email103 (not printed)

153 http://www.mrc.ac.uk/pdf-nimr_taskforce_07july04.pdf

154 http://www.mrc.ac.uk/pdf-nimr_taskforce_07july04.pdf

155 http://www.mrc.ac.uk/pdf-nimr_taskforce_08july04.pdf

156 The email was actually sent at 12.05pm.

Davies, who responded that evening, expressed surprise at the substance of these amendments and felt that it would be unfair to make substantive changes to what had been agreed by seven Task Force members. Professor Denton agreed with her.¹⁵⁷ The Chairman unsuccessfully tried to contact NIMR members to discuss the amendments. In view of the consensus that had been established during the earlier conference call and the need to circulate a final report, Professor Blakemore agreed to make only the unsubstantive changes suggested by Dr Gamblin and circulated the report on Thursday 22 July. Professor Blakemore suggested to the two NIMR members that they might write separately to the MRC Council setting out where their views conflicted with the conclusions agreed. He also suggested that Professor Flavell attend the Council meeting on 29 July to present these views in person. All three did take this course of action.¹⁵⁸

80. The NIMR evidence gives its view of the final stages as follows: “The NIMR TF members made extensive efforts to find wordings that enabled the views of the whole TF to be reflected in the final report. Many of these suggestions were rejected by the MRC secretariat or CEO and eventually the MRC CEO took the arbitrary decision to omit the views of the NIMR TF members from the final report and in doing so marginalised them from the TF process”.¹⁵⁹ Professor Blakemore took issue with this assessment, suggesting that it was a “misrepresentation” to suggest that MRC secretariat or the CEO rejected the proposed changes. He said that decisions on what changes to include were not arbitrary, but “the only decision possible in the circumstances” and that “We did our very best to incorporate all the non-substantive changes”.¹⁶⁰ There was a subsequent argument over whether the amendments proposed by Dr Gamblin were sent, as opposed to received, before the deadline. There were apparently some difficulties with the transmission of email traffic at MRC. We have not sought to resolve this narrow issue. The important point is that the amendments proposed sought to alter the conclusions that had been agreed by all members of the Task Force who participated in the conference call on 19 July.

81. A few days later, on 26 July, Dr Lovell-Badge sent Professor Blakemore a long email in which he claimed that unanimity had only been reached on “ambiguously worded reports” and accusing the Chairman of avoiding the issue because it was contentious.¹⁶¹ Dr Lovell-Badge said in evidence that he blocked publication of the final report after he had learned that Professor Blakemore contacted Kings’ and UCL to tell them “essentially, that it was a straight fight between the two of them”. He felt that this was “certainly not in the spirit of the agreement that we had at the meeting”.¹⁶² Professor Blakemore argues that he was carrying out the instructions of the Task Force in contacting UCL and KCL and that he “made it absolutely clear” that “any offer would have to be better than could be achieved at Mill Hill for it to be acceptable”.¹⁶³ The late submission of substantive amendments put the Chairman in a very difficult position, given the desire to report to the Council on 29 July.

157 www.mrc.ac.uk/pdf_nimr_taskforce_08July04.pdf

158 Ev 215

159 Ev 176

160 Ev 219

161 Email 282 (not printed)

162 Q 90

163 Ev 185

We discuss the case for an extra meeting of the Task Force below,¹⁶⁴ but, setting this aside, **we conclude that Professor Blakemore did everything he reasonably could to take on board late amendments proposed by NIMR Task Force members whilst preserving the will of the majority on the Task Force.**

Loss of the consensus—Mill Hill as an option

82. Eventually, after the Task Force had failed to reach a consensus on the issue, the following wording was agreed for the final report of the Task Force:

“The majority of the Task Force members do not consider the Mill Hill site suitable for the renewed institute in the long term, whereas others do. The latter recommend comparison between the Mill Hill, KCL and UCL options on a scientific value-for-money basis, whereas the former suggest that in the event that negotiations with KCL and UCL fail to produce an acceptable solution, the Council should consult the Task Force again”.¹⁶⁵

83. It was extremely regrettable that the Task Force members who agreed the wording of texts at the final meeting, again at the conference call on 25 June and then a third time at the final conference call on 19 July subsequently objected to the words that had been agreed. We can understand the frustration of other members and the Chairman of the Task Force with the disintegration of the consensus. **NIMR staff members of the Task Force did a remarkable job given the pressure they were under and deserve to come out of the process with great credit. However, the unravelling of agreed texts on three occasions suggest that the pressure to renege on agreements reached in the Task Force proved too great and made the job of running the Task Force and achieving consensus almost impossible.**

84. We sought to establish why the consensus apparently agreed in meetings and conference calls and email correspondence repeatedly broke down shortly afterwards. Professor Blakemore alluded to his explanation of why the consensus broke down: “Things began to fall apart after the fifth meeting, and especially after I had communicated the conclusions of that meeting to Sir John [Skehel]”.¹⁶⁶ In his mind, it was the conversations between the two NIMR members and NIMR management that were behind the former’s efforts to revise the wording that had been agreed. Professor Blakemore alleges that Lovell-Badge, after agreeing the conclusions of the final meeting at the conference call on 25 June, “suddenly changed his position radically after speaking to Sir John Skehel”.¹⁶⁷ In one email, sent immediately following Professor Blakemore’s heated telephone conversation with Dr Lovell-Badge on 28 June, the Chairman reports that “He [Dr Lovell-Badge] said that he has, indeed been speaking to John Skehel, and it is difficult for me not to conclude that John is driving his behaviour”.¹⁶⁸ Dr Lovell-Badge told us that his negative opinion of the London bids hardened over time as more information was collated and that his opinion

¹⁶⁴ See paragraph 88.

¹⁶⁵ Task Force report, Executive summary, para 14

¹⁶⁶ Ev 211

¹⁶⁷ Ev 212

¹⁶⁸ Ev 230, email 74

was not determined by colleagues at NIMR, although they shared the same view as his.¹⁶⁹ NIMR evidence states that “At no point was any pressure put on the NIMR TF members by the NIMR management to alter the views they held or expressed to other TF members”.¹⁷⁰ The two NIMR members of the Task Force did discuss its work after each meeting with the Heads of Division at Mill Hill, as was consistent with their remit. We recognise that even if there was no intention to exert overt pressure, the two NIMR Task Force members may have felt under an obligation to represent the views of their peers and management to the Task Force.

85. As we have recorded, much of the dissatisfaction at Mill Hill with the process stems from the belief of staff there that the long term option of Mill Hill was not given proper consideration at the final meeting. A statement from NIMR Heads of Division on the process was placed on the NIMR website and circulated to the Task Force on 9 July. It expressed dismay that the Chairman of the Task Force interpreted the conclusions of the Task Force “quite differently” from them.¹⁷¹ It personalises the issue by implying that this was the interpretation of the Chairman, rather than the majority view on the Task Force. Professor Blakemore complained to Sir John Skehel at the efforts “to try to demonise me in this way”.¹⁷² A response from the Heads of Division to the Council’s conclusions posted on the website early the next month regretted that the Mill Hill option was not considered, “even though a majority of those members present understood that it would be included in the Task Force recommendations to Council. We are frankly appalled by the mismanagement that, after all this time and effort, led to the failure of the Task Force to consider properly the Mill Hill option”.¹⁷³ This statement indicates the strength of feeling at NIMR, but it fails to make the distinction between the discussion of the merits Mill Hill as an option, which did take place, and the status of Mill Hill in the event that either of the preferred London options did not prove viable, which was not considered.¹⁷⁴

86. We asked other members of the Task Force for their understanding of why the consensus broke down. Professor Davies told us that “There was paranoia about whether the NIMR was going to be closed, and we never mentioned that NIMR could be closed at any stage”,¹⁷⁵ a point which Professor Tomlinson endorsed.¹⁷⁶ His interpretation was that Dr Lovell-Badge and Dr Gamblin changed their mind because they felt that Mill Hill was vulnerable in the short to medium term.¹⁷⁷ Other members of the Task Force assumed that they were consulting with their colleagues at NIMR. Professor Tomlinson said that he found the breakdown of consensus “extremely disappointing”¹⁷⁸ but thought that it was

169 Not printed

170 Ev 176

171Ev 232, email146,

172Ev 237, email192,

173 Ev 216

174 See para 75 above.

175 Q 287

176 Q 301 [Tomlinson]

177 Q 309

178 Q 292

only natural that the NIMR members should consult with colleagues and report back reflecting views at NIMR: “it was bound to happen, I guess”.¹⁷⁹

87. It is difficult to know the origins of the notion that Mill Hill would be closed if the London bids did not succeed since this was not, as far as we can ascertain, the intention of members of the Task Force, even if this point was not specifically discussed. We have no evidence to suggest that it was an inference deliberately drawn by NIMR management to bolster their opposition to the proposals. Whatever the origin of this fear, it needed to be answered. Because the Task Force was not explicit on the “fall back” position, there was a vacuum that such fears and concerns could fill. They should have been addressed immediately, either by the Task Force or by MRC itself. Professor Davies was not “100 per cent convinced” that more could have been done at the meeting and in conference calls to reassure NIMR staff but she acknowledged the weakness in the Task Force’s conclusions: “Maybe we could have been a bit more explicit in the sense that we could have said that our strongly favoured option would be relocation, exploring relocation to KCL and UCL; but that in the end we would obviously return to a comparison with Mill Hill, which we did not state. That would have been more reassuring”.¹⁸⁰ **We conclude that the failure of the Task Force or MRC to counter authoritatively the fears that NIMR might be closed if the London options failed was a serious error: it contributed further to the uncertainty surrounding the institute’s future and contributed to the worsening relations between NIMR staff and MRC.**

A sixth meeting

88. Both Professor Flavell and Sir Paul Nurse described the failure of the Task Force to address specifically the issue of Mill Hill as a fall back as a major failing. They felt that there should have been a sixth meeting of the Task Force in order to address this point: “with greater flexibility we could have come to a better solution”, Sir Paul Nurse said.¹⁸¹ Professor Blakemore notes that positions simply hardened in the conference calls following the final meeting. He argues that a further meeting of the Task Force would be “unconstructive and unpleasant” and believes that, in the present circumstances, it would be an “arena for recrimination”.¹⁸² Professor Davies said that the only time constraints that affected the work of the Task Force applied after the fifth meeting and the Task Force wanted to report to the MRC Council by its meeting on 29 July.¹⁸³ She told us that the Task Force was keen to report to the MRC Council meeting on 29 July in order to move the process forward and minimise the destabilisation of NIMR.¹⁸⁴ She also thought that, in retrospect, a sixth meeting might have been helpful as face-to-face meetings can sometimes achieve more than is possible remote communication.¹⁸⁵ Professor Tomlinson thought that the time for a sixth meeting would have been in July or August and that a further meeting now would not

179 Q 312 [Tomlinson]

180 Q 312 [Davies]

181 Q 170

182 Ev 218

183 Q 273

184 Q 325

185 Q 313 [Davies]

progress matters.¹⁸⁶ The target for reporting to the MRC Council, combined with the practical difficulties for members of fitting the work of the Task Force around their other responsibilities, subjected the task of achieving a consensus to additional pressure. **We conclude that the Task Force should have given serious consideration to having a further meeting in order to try to reach an agreed position on whether Mill Hill should be an active third option or a fall back position. The Task Force had already managed to reach a consensus against what must have appeared, at times, to be long odds. Of course, a further meeting may not have been able to reach a form of words that was agreeable to all sides, but, in view of the way in which the Task Force had already worked together to resolve differences of opinion and taking into account the consequences of a divided or minority report, it was worth a try. The Task Force should have considered holding an extra meeting rather than continuing with publication of the report as it stood, if necessary, by asking the MRC Council for more time.**

89. We agree with most Task Force members that, given what has happened since, it would not be realistic to reconvene the Task Force at this stage. In view of the very public disagreement there was on the Task Force we believe it unlikely that a re-convened meeting could reach agreement at this stage.

Conclusions on the process

90. We have commented that MRC rightly sought to undertake a more inclusive strategy with its appointment of the Task Force and have recognised that efforts were made to engage with NIMR staff. The lessons of Forward Investment Strategy on engagement had been learned. The participation of NIMR members on the Task Force, though desirable, made the achievement of a consensus on the way forward an extremely challenging goal. Professor Blakemore worked very hard to achieve and then preserve what must have seemed at the outset an unlikely consensus. However, this fragile consensus could be seen to be held together on the basis of a misunderstanding about the future of the institute in the event of neither London bids proving acceptable to MRC. With hindsight, a preferable approach may have been to address the few but significant differences head on and to report back where no agreement could be found. This is what happened eventually, but by then the damage had been done. It was the failure to explain the full implications of the conclusions of the Task Force which contributed to the deterioration in relations between MRC and NIMR. Professor Davies acknowledged that “Maybe we did not communicate well enough in the process”.¹⁸⁷ She also said that “If you want to take the opportunity of change, you have got to be able to carry the troops with you and you do not leave them in that unstable land for very long”.¹⁸⁸ MRC has signally failed to carry its troops with it in this process.

Accusations of coercion

91. During the course of this inquiry serious allegations were made about the conduct of Professor Blakemore in chairing the Task Force. Given the nature of the allegations and

186 Q 304

187 Q 300

188 Q 300

their potential damage to Professor Blakemore and to MRC, we felt obliged to investigate them. We therefore took further written and oral evidence from those directly and indirectly involved. We deal with these specific allegations in turn.

Alleged coercion of Dr Lovell-Badge

92. During the oral evidence session on 1 December Dr Lovell-Badge told us that “I was in receipt of various forms of attempts at coercion, such as phone calls late at night threatening me with my job”.¹⁸⁹ He cited specifically two telephone conversations he had had with Professor Blakemore; one on 15 February, the other on 26 June 2004.

93. The first telephone call on 15 February followed attempts by the Chairman to seek agreement on the wording of the summary of the third meeting of the Task Force on 8 February. Dr Lovell-Badge objected to wording in the draft which referred to a “new” institute with a clear and definitive scientific focus.¹⁹⁰ After further email exchanges between Task Force members Professor Blakemore sent a confidential email to the Task Force setting out his thoughts on the likelihood of capital investment being available for Mill Hill to maintain its existing portfolio and to add new research to it. He said that “I don’t think that it will be possible (even if desirable) to keep an unchanged Mill Hill going, within the existing budget, on the 10–20 year time-scale”.¹⁹¹ The Chairman called Dr Lovell-Badge to discuss this the same day. Professor Blakemore records that “The conversation was not at all acrimonious, and there was no hint of a threat in anything that I said”.¹⁹² Dr Lovell-Badge told us that the vision outlined by Professor Blakemore in this phone call would have involved the NIMR losing “at least half the science going on there, including, for example, all the work that I do in stem cells and genetics”.¹⁹³ He also said that “Colin then asked me, I guess, not to talk about this”.¹⁹⁴ Professor Blakemore says that this last remark is “absolutely untrue”.¹⁹⁵

94. The vision outlined by Professor Blakemore was seen by Dr Lovell-Badge as evidence that the Chairman had a “hidden agenda”.¹⁹⁶ In an email to the whole Task Force on 15 February he encouraged the Chairman to make his thoughts known. This email from Dr Lovell-Badge to the Task Force does not make reference to any coercion on the part of the Chairman in relation to the telephone call earlier that day. Instead, Dr Lovell-Badge discusses his disagreements with the draft wording and, in particular, the impact of this vision on the staff at NIMR.¹⁹⁷ A final draft of the summary was agreed by the Task Force the following day and published on the website. According to Dr Lovell-Badge, he reported this perceived attempted coercion to his line manager, Sir John Skehel, and considered

189 Q 86

190 Q 90; Ev 190

191 Ev 192

192 Ev 193

193 Q 90

194 Q 90

195 Ev 193

196 See paras 112-118 for further discussion of this issue.

197 Ev 194

resigning from the Task Force.¹⁹⁸ In the evidence received in relation to this telephone call we can see nothing that could reasonably be described as coercion. We discuss this exchange further in paragraphs 112–118 in the context of accusations that there was a “hidden agenda” on the part of the Chairman.

95. The second telephone call referred to by Dr Lovell-Badge took place on Monday 28 June, in the context of email correspondence about the final meeting of the Task Force on 21 June and the agreement of the wording of the final meeting summary during a conference call between members of the Task Force on 25 June.¹⁹⁹ The following Monday, 28 June, Dr Lovell-Badge emailed the Task Force to object to the wording that had been agreed. He said that “I know many of you seem content with the Summary as written, but after what was said at the conference call of Friday and a weekend to reflect on everything, I feel strongly that it still does not make it sufficiently clear that Mill Hill remains a valid option to which the other bids have to be compared”.²⁰⁰ In oral evidence to us, Dr Lovell-Badge said that he was putting a block on the publication of the summary because Professor Blakemore had contacted the two London bidders and told them “essentially, that it was a straight fight between the two of them ... I felt this was certainly not in the spirit of the agreement that we had at the meeting, which was that any option to move the Institute clearly had to be better than what was at Mill Hill, which of course implicitly requires a comparison with Mill Hill”.²⁰¹

96. The phone call on 28 June was in fact made by Dr Lovell-Badge at around 11.30pm. He, in turn, was responding to calls from Professor Blakemore which he had failed to pick up on his mobile phone.²⁰² Dr Lovell-Badge describes the conversation as follows:

“Colin was very aggressive late that night over the phone. He did not attempt to understand what I was saying. Towards the end of the call he practically shouted something along the lines of ‘Robin, I don’t know how you dare to challenge me, you work for the MRC and are therefore my employee’. Because he had already said something similar to me at the end of February, I was less shocked than I had been at that time, so I asked him if this was a threat? He did not deny this, but continued: “If you don’t sign the report then MRC Council will just close down the Institute”. I responded by saying that this sounded like another threat, at which point Colin hung up the phone.”²⁰³

97. For his part, Professor Blakemore denies that he threatened Dr Lovell-Badge. He said that “I deny categorically threatening to dismiss him and I did not use the quoted words”.²⁰⁴ He also denies saying anything to Robin Lovell-Badge “that could have been construed as a threat of dismissal”.²⁰⁵ He states that he is “astounded” by this account of the

198 Ev 178

199 See para 67 above.

200 Ev 198

201 Q 90

202 Ev 177

203 Ev 177

204 Ev 176; not printed

205 Ev 202

conversation and that the quotations are “pure invention”.²⁰⁶ His complete recollection of the conversation was that:

“He was immediately extremely abusive and accused me of pursuing my own agenda.... Far from threatening him if he would not agree to the document or coercing him to do so, I made the suggestion (which I had ALREADY put to him and the rest of the Task Force in my earlier email) that we could release the statement as a majority view and record his disagreement ... This conversation was somewhat “heated”—hardly surprising in the circumstances—but the hostility originated from Robin, who phoned me, very late at night, and immediately poured abuse on me. And at no point during this or any other conversation did I say anything that could possible have been construed as a threat to Robin Lovell-Badge.”²⁰⁷

The only point of overlap in the two recollections of the conversation, apart from that it was heated, appears to be the acknowledgement from Professor Blakemore that “I did express my surprise that senior MRC staff should be so hostile towards me and the MRC when the MRC owns the institute and employs the staff”.²⁰⁸

98. The day after this telephone call Dr Lovell-Badge received a call from Professor Blakemore, who apologized for losing his temper and indicated that he had explained to the London bidders that their bids had to be considered in comparison with Mill Hill. Dr Lovell-Badge then agreed to sign the summary on the understanding that Mill Hill was “at least an unstated option”.²⁰⁹ Dr Lovell-Badge also states that he reported what he considered to be threats to his line manager, Sir John Skehel, who states in supplementary evidence that he recollects Dr Lovell-Badge reporting this and previous threats to him.²¹⁰ As further evidence to support these allegations, Dr Lovell-Badge also cites his email to the whole Task Force of 26 July, in which he refers to “far too many unpleasant phone conversations with you, where you have generally ignored what I have said, and in some cases even threatened me”.²¹¹ Following this long email, which contained strong criticisms of Professor Blakemore’s chairmanship of the Task Force, the latter telephoned Dr Lovell-Badge in order to “talk through all these allegations. The conversation was sad rather than heated”. When Professor Blakemore asked about the “unpleasant” phone calls Dr Lovell-Badge referred back to the call on 28 June.²¹²

99. Dr Lovell-Badge repeated these allegations of threatening calls in a meeting between Professor Blakemore and Heads of Division at Mill Hill on 8 October, at which Professor Blakemore “at first denied this but then admitted that he did recall a heated telephone call”.²¹³ Professor Blakemore recalls that he “did indeed respond by saying that we had had

206 Memorandum from Professor Blakemore; not printed

207 Ev 199

208 Ev 181

209 Ev 178

210 Ev 175

211 Ev 175

212 Ev 203

213 Ev 175

one (but only one) ‘heated conversation’ (on 28th June), but this was most certainly not an admission of threats”.²¹⁴ Professor Tomlinson, who was at this meeting, said that he did not recall Dr Lovell-Badge accusing Professor Blakemore of threatening him.²¹⁵

100. In his supplementary evidence, Professor Blakemore finds it “astounding that Sir John should now suddenly remember that a Divisional Head at NIMR told him previously of a threat of dismissal from the CEO of MRC. If this had happened it would obviously have been Sir John’s duty, as Director of an MRC institute, to report it immediately to the Chairman of the Council, to the AUT and to the Head of Human Resources at MRC. Not to have done these things would have been a serious failure of Directoral responsibility. In reality, despite Sir John having poured out abuse and accusations against me on many occasions during the work of the Task Force, he never mentioned any complaint from Robin about coercion or threats”.²¹⁶

101. We have not found convincing evidence that a complaint by Dr Lovell-Badge about a threat to his job by Professor Blakemore was made at the time of the incidents concerned. Such a serious accusation would have carried more weight had it been made at the time rather than in public during the final stages of the decision making process when relations between NIMR and MRC management had fallen into mutual animosity. It is clear that there were heated exchanges about the inclusion of the Mill Hill option but in the absence of any contemporaneous notes of the conversation we have no way of verifying who said what.

Other Task Force Members

102. In view of the allegations of “extreme persuasion” referred to above we asked other members of the Task Force for their views on the nature of the pressure and persuasion employed during the proceedings of the Task Force.

Professor Tomlinson

103. One particular email from Professor Blakemore to Professor Tomlinson was cited by Sir John Skehel as the most convincing evidence of “extreme persuasion of some members of the Task Force to decide in a particular way”.²¹⁷ The email was sent on 10 July during the post-fifth meeting exchanges seeking to agree the final report of the Task Force. It was sent in response to a message from Professor Tomlinson that sought to break the deadlock over whether Mill Hill should be included as a third active option alongside the two London bids, as a fall back position, or not be included at all. Professor Tomlinson was about to go on holiday for two weeks, so was not expecting to be involved in the final resolution of the disagreement. The salient part of his email reads:

“My own view about ‘fall-back’ remains the same, that is, that we did not explicitly agree such an option. Relocation to Central London either UCL or KCL with a managed transition from Mill Hill is what we agreed. However, if the Task Force

214 Ev 216

215 Q 279

216 Ev 208

217 Q 83

now accepts that ‘fall back’ to Mill Hill was implicit in our discussions, then I suggest we stop using ‘fall back’, ‘back-up’ etc and move the debate forward by formally including Mill Hill in the competition now, making it clear that the Council of MRC may reject not just the bids from KCL and UCL, but that from Mill Hill as well”.²¹⁸

In response Professor Blakemore sent an email in confidence to Professor Tomlinson, which we publish in full with the evidence. In it he states that:

“I understand your argument, but it would be seen as caving in to the dirty campaign of John Skehel if we were simply to include Mill Hill as an equal third option.... I personally cannot sign up to a simple 3-option recommendation, but I am desperate to avoid being the only person to be seen to be opposed to the status quo—which is the way it will be represented. You say that the Council might then reject all three options, but if the TF has formally recommended Mill Hill, I have not the slightest doubt that John Skehel will take the MRC to judicial review (he has threatened that already) on the grounds that the Council is overruling the recommendation of the independent TF. So, please withdraw your suggestion for ‘formally including Mill Hill in the competition now’, Steve. You have made it abundantly clear previously that you don’t see Mill Hill as a serious option for the future. Please be brave enough to stick with that view. Please send an email withdrawing it, or I predict that Steve, Robin and Richard will put huge pressure on Kay [Davies] and Dick [Denton] to capitulate”.²¹⁹

104. Professor Tomlinson subsequently sent a message to the Task Force withdrawing this suggestion and clarified his position as follows: “I believe the Task Force agreed on relocation of NIMR to either KCL or UCL with a managed transition from Mill Hill over an appropriate period of time. If both bids are rejected by MRC, the Council must reach its own conclusions, but must not be able to use the recommendations of the current Task Force as the reason for NIMR remaining at Mill Hill.”²²⁰ In oral evidence to us Professor Tomlinson confirmed that he did not feel coerced.²²¹ He also said that any “additional evidence of coercion or threats, as far as I am concerned that is all hearsay”.²²²

105. We conclude that the email from Professor Blakemore to Professor Tomlinson was not evidence of attempted coercion. Taken in its full context, it reveals that Professor Blakemore was desperate not to cave in to what he clearly viewed was a underhand campaign by NIMR to stay where it is, and also that he did not want to be seen to be forcing through a change. For his part, Professor Tomlinson confirmed that his email suggesting that Mill Hill be considered as an equal option was only his alternative to the “fall back” position that was being suggested, and that he opposed. It was tendered on a conditional basis in order to reach a consensus. He was not being dissuaded from proffering his preferred position, although the withdrawal of this suggestion meant that the crucial issue of the status of the Mill Hill option was not clarified. Having seen the full

218 Ev 236, email165

219 Ev 236, email167

220 Ev 237, email168

221 Q 277

222 Q 279

exchanges of correspondence which formed the background to this email, we do not consider that this email can properly be regarded as evidence of coercion.

Professor Davies

106. Professor Davies assured us that she had not changed her views on the basis of any lobbying during the proceedings. She was unable to attend the fifth meeting, so although she had reported her views in advance to the consultants, which were then considered at the meeting, her exact position on the Mill Hill option was not clear. It was, however, crucial to the Task Force, which was apparently evenly balanced on this issue. She made no complaint that her views had not been taken into account by the Task Force.²²³ During the discussion of the wording of the summary of the fifth meeting, Professor Davies pressed for clarity in the wording relating to the position of Mill Hill. In one email on 28 June, she said “I think we should at least clarify what the fall back position is. If NIMR at Mill Hill is out of the question, it may be important to say that now”.²²⁴ Two hours later, and without any further email exchanges, she sent another email stating that “Since we are all enthusiastic about the central London possibilities, the summary can stay as it is without further discussion as we clearly think that the new opportunities are exciting and feasible. I favour no further change”.²²⁵ We asked Professor Davies what had caused her to change her mind. She explained that she did not want to include Mill Hill as a fall back position because it was not the intention to give that option equal status with the two London bids and because the Task Force wanted to ensure the active engagement of Mill Hill in exploring the favoured options. Professor Davies, who was away at a conference at the time of the email exchange, told us that “Somebody will have spoken to me but I can make up my own mind on that”.²²⁶ We have no evidence to believe that Professor Davies was subject to coercion during the Task Force process.

Sir Paul Nurse and Professor Flavell

107. In oral evidence to us, NIMR witnesses cited as evidence of coercion the refusal of both Sir Paul Nurse and Professor Flavell to sign a statement, circulated by the Chairman shortly before the first oral evidence session, saying that the Task Force had operated “without coercion”.²²⁷ They told us subsequently in evidence that they declined to sign not because they themselves felt coerced during the Task Force proceedings but in order to attempt to produce a statement that they thought all members of the Task Force would have felt able to sign. Sir Paul Nurse told us that the words as drafted were “too pointed” and that while he felt that he was on the receiving end of “strong persuasion” rather than coercion, others on the Task Force, notably MRC employees, might have thought otherwise.²²⁸ He was also unaware of the substance of the many bilateral telephone calls that had taken place so could not say with complete confidence what had happened elsewhere. Professor Flavell commented that the phone calls from the Chairman in

223 Qs 273-4; Ev 65

224 Ev 229, email 64

225 Ev 230, email 64b

226 Q 324

227 Qs 74-5

228 Q 127

between meetings were “somewhat inappropriate, but I did not feel coerced”.²²⁹ Sir Paul Nurse said that he received quite a few calls from Professor Blakemore trying to persuade him of certain opinions²³⁰ and that “I certainly felt that there was a lot of persuasion going on, yes”. Nonetheless he thought that it was “just within the limits but close to the limits in the sense that in my normal experience in such task forces I would not have so many one-to-one conversations outside such a Task Force. I think it was acceptable, but there was certainly a lot of it”.²³¹

108. Having heard from those concerned, we conclude that the refusal of two members of the Task Force to sign a statement saying that the Task Force had operated without coercion was not in itself evidence that they had been coerced. They felt that the Chairman had stayed just within the bounds of “strong persuasion”. Rather, their refusal to sign was an acknowledgement by them that others may have felt coerced. The proposed amendment to the wording was a laudable attempt to produce a statement which all members of the Task Force could support without reservation.

Other members

109. Professor Denton told us that he did not experience “any hint” of coercion by Professor Blakemore and viewed the examples of possible coercion discussed above as “frankly not credible”.²³² Dr Gamblin told us that he had not experienced any attempts at coercion.²³³

110. We were not able to take evidence from the other member of the Task Force, Professor Bernstein, in the time we had available. Nevertheless, given that his views were more closely in line with those of the Chairman than some of the others and having seen the confidential email traffic during the Task Force process, we do not believe that he was subjected to any attempts at coercion.

Conclusion on alleged coercion

111. The line between strong persuasion and coercion is a thin one and one that might be placed differently by the participants involved, according to their different positions, perceptions and circumstances. One man’s coercion is another’s sweet surrender. It is natural that those whose views diverged from the consensus the most were subject to the most persuasion. We found no specific credible evidence of coercion. It is unfortunate and regrettable that allegations of this nature, which have proved impossible to uphold, have been made in public and after the event. We heard of efforts at persuasion by Professor Blakemore that were regarded as “somewhat inappropriate” and just within the limits of acceptability. Professor Blakemore was intensely engaged with securing a unanimous consensus for the MRC Council. The means by which he attempted to meet this difficult objective could reasonably be interpreted as heavy handed and inappropriately forceful on

229 Q 135

230 Q 131

231 Q133

232 Ev 170

233 Q 97

occasion. His tactics, as we have seen, very nearly succeeded on three separate occasions. But, as Chief Executive of the organisation dealing with its largest research institute, it was a high risk strategy.

Were there any “hidden agendas”?

112. Many of the complaints about the process found in the written evidence and on the Committee’s visit to NIMR focussed on the lack of transparency and a suspected “hidden agenda” of MRC leadership. Some perceived “a small cabal wanting to impose their will on the scientific community”.²³⁴ The process is described by some witnesses as “secretive”, “high-handed” and “inept”,²³⁵ while for others it was “entirely fair, open and transparent”.²³⁶ MRC refers to an exhaustive decision making process. Professor Rothwell, a member of the FIS committee, recalls “one of the most extensive, rigorous and consultative reviews of science in the UK that I have observed” and suggests that allegations that there was a predefined agenda at MRC head office “are completely unfounded”.²³⁷

113. Of course, it is only natural that each Task Force member brought with them to the job their own views based on their experiences of the research models that work best. Professor Tomlinson made no secret at the outset of his preferred option: for NIMR to be closed and its resources dispersed to universities throughout the country by MRC. He was subsequently persuaded by the debate in the Task Force that co-location in central London was the best way for it to achieve its agreed vision. We have already referred to the difficult position of the two NIMR members. Whist they made no secret of the benefits of the Mill Hill site as they saw them, they engaged in the process in a professional and independent manner.²³⁸

The federated option

114. As we have seen, the members of the Task Force were generally complimentary about the way that Professor Blakemore chaired the Task Force. The only evidence we detected that he may have been seeking to promote a certain outcome relates to the consideration by the Task Force of the “federated” option for NIMR, which involved it being split into four separate London centres. The Task Force had already agreed to a single site option for NIMR at its second meeting and rejected the federated option. The Chairman then emailed each of the non-NIMR members of the Task Force, separately, and the observer, in confidence, at the end of March to enlist their support for this federated option being further discussed.²³⁹

115. Dr Lovell-Badge and others refer to Professor Blakemore’s apparent enthusiasm for the federated option for NIMR as evidence of his “hidden agenda”. We have already

234 Ev 61

235 Ev 80

236 Ev 80

237 Ev 78

238 Ev 78

239 Ev 169

referred to the telephone conversation between Professor Blakemore and Dr Lovell-Badge on 15 February about the Chairman's vision for a future NIMR that would have led to it being considerably smaller than its existing size.²⁴⁰ It seems that, during this call, in an effort to secure Dr Lovell-Badge's agreement to what the Task Force had agreed at its meeting, Professor Blakemore explained his thinking for a potential future for Mill Hill, taking into account his understanding of the financial realities applying to further funding. This vision did not appeal to NIMR, and indeed appeared to threaten the future of the institute as currently constituted. The telephone exchange led directly to the Chairman setting out his thinking by email to the whole Task Force and as such, could have been viewed as evidence of an "agenda" which, until that point, the Chairman had not revealed.²⁴¹

116. Dr Lovell-Badge recalls that this so-called federated option was then put back on the agenda for the fourth meeting by the Chairman.²⁴² Professor Flavell and Sir Paul Nurse confirmed that this option appeared in between two Task Force meetings and that the Chairman solicited support for it separately. Sir Paul said that he could not really understand why it had been brought back on the agenda because it had already been rejected in principle. This contributed to his impression that "sometimes there was more going on outside the meeting than I would normally have expected".²⁴³ Professor Blakemore responds that the proposal for a federated option came in response to the invitation agreed at the third meeting for universities to submit proposals and says that "I thought it would be embarrassing, even offensive simply to dismiss it and exclude KC and UCL from the bidding process".²⁴⁴ Instead, he encouraged both universities to submit single site bids. He reports that the federated option was then considered at the fourth meeting of the Task Force and rejected.²⁴⁵ This rejection was accepted by all. Professor Blakemore stresses that he did not try to persuade other members to accept the federated option, but merely urged them to consider it at the next meeting. The majority were happy to do this, although the two NIMR members were "very upset".²⁴⁶

117. It is apparent from the email exchanges that Professor Blakemore was attracted to the federated option. He confirmed this to us in evidence.²⁴⁷ We find it odd that he chose to pursue this option in apparently individual private emails to other non-NIMR members of the Task Force rather than in a full meeting of the group or even a public group email. It was particularly odd for him to seek to persuade the representative from the Department of Health in the Scottish Executive, Dr Spaul, of his view, given that she was only an observer of the process. Indeed, she was "surprised" to receive this email.²⁴⁸ The sudden re-appearance of the federated option after the Task Force had explicitly ruled it out certainly surprised some members of the Task Force. At the very least, it seems that Professor

240 See paras 93–4 above; Q 90

241 Not printed

242 Ev 145

243 Q 138

244 Ev 220

245 Ev 185

246 Ev 185

247 Ev 185

248 Ev 169

Blakemore failed to convey adequately the reasons behind this move and thus risked being seen to be giving a second chance to his own favoured option.

118. The only other evidence we found of any possible hidden agenda was the comment by Sir Paul Nurse that towards the end of the process “I began to feel that there was a stronger agenda emerging that was antagonistic to Mill Hill than I had noticed during the Task Force”.²⁴⁹ By this stage, however, relations between NIMR and Professor Blakemore had deteriorated as NIMR staff accused the Chief Executive of seeking to force through the central London option. There was much going on behind the scenes of which Sir Paul, in the United States, may have been unaware. None of the other non-NIMR members could point to any evidence of the Chairman having a hidden agenda.

5 Campaign by NIMR

119. We have taken a hard look at how MRC has handled the process of reviewing the future of NIMR. We have also followed up some concerns we have encountered about the way in which NIMR staff have responded to, and engaged with, the process.

120. We have already discussed the level of engagement in the FIS review by NIMR staff and the influence of senior management there on the Task Force process. We are aware from this inquiry and from earlier representations made to us that the proposals surrounding NIMR's future have caused great unrest there and have occupied a considerable amount of staff energy and time. It is natural for staff in any organisation facing major change and potential relocation to be concerned and to question the case for change. It is reasonable for them to argue strongly against the proposals if they do not see their merit but not reasonable to obstruct or interfere with the process itself.

121. We have received a large number of submissions from scientists around the world, many of whom have experience of working at Mill Hill, praising the status and work of the institute and questioning the need for change.²⁵⁰ We recognise that NIMR staff may have been proactive in mobilising former colleagues and collaborators to support their opposition to the proposals, but the fact that they have responded in such numbers gives some indication as to both the quality of the science at Mill Hill and the high regard in which it is held by so many senior scientists who have worked there.

122. Written evidence we have received from staff at NIMR suggests a strong engagement with the process. Scientists there told us that they were not against a move to London in principle, but had yet to be persuaded by the evidence that it would necessarily be more advantageous than the further development of the Mill Hill. They expressed concern that any move might damage a national asset and adversely affect the career prospects of many young researchers.²⁵¹ We have already commented upon the professional and objective way in which the two NIMR members of the Task Force engaged in and contributed to its work; and noted that they were part of the consensus established until after the final meeting.

123. Any criticism of the NIMR campaign seems to centre upon the attitude and actions of senior NIMR staff. Professor Denton refers to the “apparently extremely negative attitude of many senior staff within NIMR”.²⁵² It is clear from the email correspondence and his evidence to us, some of it in confidence, that Professor Blakemore shares this view. At one point in the email correspondence, Professor Blakemore refers to the “dirty campaign” of Sir John Skehel against the proposed move.²⁵³ He refers to the “apparently uncompromising stance of Sir John Skehel and NIMR senior staff” when he initially visited NIMR and noted the “unwillingness of Sir John and senior staff to engage with the MRC”.²⁵⁴ We have certainly seen that Sir John has been resolute in his defence of what he

250 Ev 59, 61, 65, 75, 122

251 Ev 92

252 Ev 170

253 Ev 236, email 166

254 Ev 212

sees as the best option—the retention of the Mill Hill site for NIMR. We have also referred to the inflammatory language used in postings on the website by NIMR Heads of Division and the personal accusations made against Professor Blakemore.²⁵⁵ These responses were unnecessarily aggressive and served to poison an already strained relationship with the MRC Chief Executive.

124. We have also found two specific instances that could be used to support a claim that the NIMR campaign against a move was in some way obstructive or amounted to an attempt to interfere with the process. The publication by NIMR of a “*Publication Highlights 2000–04*” booklet, a few days before the launch by the Task Force of the open consultation exercise was viewed by MRC as a deliberate attempt to influence the consultation exercise by appearing to link the Task Force’s long term review of NIMR with a review of the quality of science at NIMR. This link was explicitly made in the foreword to the booklet.²⁵⁶ We do not know how widely the booklet was circulated but in the evidence we received from around the world there was often an implicit and mistaken impression that the quality of science at Mill Hill was in question.

125. It is apparent from the email correspondence that the publication of the booklet at this time was the subject of considerable discussion in the Task Force about how best to respond.²⁵⁷ When asked in evidence about this publication, Sir John told the Committee that the timing was coincidental and that it was related to the current quinquennial review.²⁵⁸ This was the first such booklet produced for a quinquennial review. We are surprised that NIMR thought it necessary to produce such a booklet for a quinquennial review as the information it contained would anyway have been available to the reviewers. **We conclude that the publication of the booklet setting out the work being done at NIMR served to align the work of the Task Force with an assessment of the quality of the science at NIMR.**

126. The second example of the lengths to which NIMR management went in opposing the proposals relates to efforts to engage the media on the issue of the proposed move. In response to our questions in oral evidence, Dr Lovell-Badge told us that he had had an “informal chat” with the Director of the Science Media Centre, Fiona Fox, whom he knew very well, following the publication of FIS proposals. He also said that “we never asked her to help us”.²⁵⁹ Sir John Skehel told us that he was not involved and “did not know what was going on”.²⁶⁰ Professor Blakemore took issue with this account of the meeting, on the basis of his conversation with Fiona Fox. He reports that Fiona Fox was expecting an informal tour of the facilities but was shocked to instead be questioned by 15 senior scientists about how to organise a media campaign against MRC. She “declined an invitation” to advise NIMR on its PR campaign and reported the encounter to the MRC press office.

255 See para 85 above.

256 NIMR, *Publication Highlights 2000–2004*

257 Emails not printed; see also www.mrc.ac.uk/pdf_nimr_taskforce_26May04.pdf

258 Q 113

259 Q 110

260 Q 108

127. We invited Fiona Fox to submit evidence on the meeting concerned. She told us that she visited NIMR in response to a long standing invitation and was taken to a meeting with 10–15 Heads of Department. She said “they [NIMR staff present] certainly did ask my advice about the media interest in this story and explained that they had been approached by several media outlets for interviews and comment. I gave bits and pieces of advice—which is what I do—but did say that the SMC was good friends with the MRC press office and I didn’t feel I could in any way become an adviser on this issue ...”.²⁶¹ She said that there “was no attempt to persuade me to play that role” and advised them to appoint a press officer if they needed long term advice and did not feel that they could use the MRC press office.²⁶² She subsequently told the MRC press office about the meeting and heard no more about it. Although Fiona Fox did not specify whether or not she was asked to be an adviser, she clearly thought it necessary to tell the MRC press office of the meeting after it had taken place. It seems to us that this meeting was more than the “informal chat” that Dr Lovell-Badge sought to imply.

Conclusion on NIMR campaign

128. In conclusion, we can understand the almost instinctive reaction of employees in resisting a perceived threat in proposals for change. We have also referred to the adverse impact on NIMR staff of the way that the initial FIS proposals were handled. We believe that most staff at NIMR did respond to the admirable efforts of MRC to engage them in the Task Force process and in particular have praised the way in which the two NIMR members of the Task Force contributed. However, we believe that many senior NIMR staff were more intent upon resistance than engaging with the process and too willing to characterise conclusions and intentions of the majority of the Task Force as evidence of the pursuit of a personal agenda by the Chief Executive. Their actions stopped only a little short of serious interference with the process and a deliberate attempt to undermine the position of the Chief Executive of their own organisation.

261 Ev 222

262 Ev 222

6 The way forward

129. The debate over the future of NIMR has polarised opinion to a remarkable degree. The way the debate has been framed has encouraged people to take a view either for or against Mill Hill. This partisan approach has been extremely damaging to attempts by MRC to engage NIMR in the decision making process. In reality, as the Task Force has proved, there is a good degree of consensus on the most favourable future for NIMR. Protests have intensified as the prospect of change has appeared to draw closer. Indeed, an impression has emerged in some quarters that NIMR at Mill Hill will suddenly close. In reality, the transitional process of a move to London would take around a decade. Whilst it is essential to deal with the present, the medium and long term focus of the current review should not be forgotten.

130. The Task Force was successful in establishing consensus on the most favourable scenario for NIMR in a central London university hospital site, provided that the chosen host could offer the facilities and governance arrangements that compared favourably with Mill Hill and would create an environment for successful translational research. The Task Force was primarily concerned with the principle of co-location in London. It was not able to establish—because the details of the proposals were still being developed—whether this ideal scenario is likely to be achievable in practice and if it would represent value for money compared to the maintenance and development of the existing institute. These factors will depend upon the detailed business cases worked up by the preferred bidder and the availability of funding from OST, and possibly other sources. An MRC subcommittee is currently considering in further detail the proposals of the two bidders and expects to report back to the MRC Council meeting on 9–10 February 2005, when a preferred bidder may be selected.

131. We have argued that the mechanisms that MRC has used to reach this stage have proved less than ideal, but the shortcomings of process were not so serious as to invalidate the outcome. They should certainly not be used to deflect attention from the task in hand. Too much work has been done and too much has been agreed for it to make any sense to start the review process all over again from square one. A new third process would prolong the uncertainty and would not be guaranteed to reach a conclusion that was acceptable to all sides. Tough decisions cannot be avoided indefinitely. The question now for MRC is how best to take those decisions and then implement them.

132. The proposed move to London is, as the Task Force agreed, an attractive one in principle. Any move of this nature carries its own risks. A research institute cannot be successfully uprooted and replanted elsewhere without taking into account a range of other factors. The right leadership, governance arrangements and scientific match are all important in attracting the right people and developing the right culture to ensure that the co-located institute thrives in its new environment and develops the links that will achieve the goals of its new mission. Equally, MRC must be satisfied that the long term funding required to support the renewed institute in central London is likely to give a scientific return that exceeds that of the Mill Hill alternative. No less important is the need to ensure that any transition process does not do irreparable damage to the science being conducted at the institute. This is of course a decision for the long term, but it would nonetheless be a

regrettable blow to UK medical science if significant numbers of internationally highly regarded Mill Hill scientists were to look elsewhere to continue their careers.

133. We believe that MRC should only begin the process of transition when it is fully satisfied that the partnership being offered by the preferred bidder is highly likely to be able to match the ideal identified by the Task Force. It should not, in its enthusiasm to embrace the new vision, be prepared to settle for an option that does not exceed the current quality of the research facilities and environment at Mill Hill. This has already been a long process and it is in everyone's interests to clarify the long term future of NIMR. The advantage MRC has is that there is no compulsion for an early move. The buildings at Mill Hill will not fall apart in the near future.

134. The main time constraints cited are the need to avoid further destabilising the institute and the need to have its future determined in time to begin the process of recruiting a successor to the current Director, a process which needs to start, according to the Chief Executive, in summer 2005.²⁶³ We are also aware that the two London bidders would like a swift decision in order to facilitate forward planning. We recognise the importance of minimising uncertainty and re-establishing some stability, but the overriding consideration for the long term must be to get the right decision on location for UK medical science. Finding the right Director and meeting the desires of potential bidders are important but secondary considerations.

135. If neither of the two London options meets MRC's requirements the question remains as to what happens then. MRC's position is that "all options" will be considered. We assume that this includes the Mill Hill option, although MRC has been noticeably unwilling to confirm exactly what these other options include.²⁶⁴ We believe that, having got this far, MRC should not give up too easily on the unanimous preference of the Task Force for a renewed national institute in the London area. If this ideal scenario appears likely to be achievable in the near future, MRC should strive hard to establish the right partnership arrangements in London. If not, we would support MRC's commitment to re-examine all the options for the future of NIMR.

263 Ev 219

264 Qs 37–40; Ev 172

Conclusions and recommendations

1. The reasons for taking a long term look at the direction and viability of NIMR at Mill Hill were not presented in a coherent or convincing way to NIMR staff or the wider community. The initial proposal for the FIS review made no reference to the simultaneous strategic science review. MRC was right to broaden any initial focus on NIMR to include other facilities, but the consequence was that management at NIMR gained the impression that the focus was really on Mill Hill and, rightly or wrongly, confidence in the ensuing process of review was damaged at the outset. (Paragraph 18)
2. We were told by members of the committee on the Forward Investment Strategy that their work was “not about money” and yet cost was one of the two reasons given for its conclusions. It is regrettable that confusion over the justification for the conclusions of the FIS review was allowed to develop. (Paragraph 24)
3. The break up of a world renowned national institute and relocation elsewhere is a risky strategy. It should not be proposed without the most careful consideration and assessment of all the costs and benefits. The FIS Subcommittee report did not provide the level of detailed consideration that was required to support such a radical proposal. (Paragraph 25)
4. By asking the FIS committee to focus only on how its facilities might best meet the vision it has established, MRC fuelled concerns in the minds of some there was a preconceived agenda in relation to Mill Hill. More importantly, it did not give the impression that it was taking a holistic and comprehensive approach to realising the vision of the future that it had agreed with its stakeholders. (Paragraph 28)
5. The perception that the work of NIMR was under attack by the FIS process was allowed to build up. The inability of MRC to convince the staff at Mill Hill that it valued the work conducted there contributed to the deterioration in relations that was to occur over the ensuing months and represents a regrettable management failure. (Paragraph 30)
6. It is essential for any organisation contemplating radical change to engage with those affected from the start in order to persuade them of the case for change and to maintain the morale of the workforce. MRC failed to do this adequately in the case of the FIS Subcommittee and thus passed up the chance to work with NIMR to effect change in a consensual manner. Greater engagement throughout its work may have fostered a more co-operative attitude at NIMR from the start, although there is evidence to suggest that some staff there were intent upon resistance, whatever the merits of the case. By seeming to impose change on a surprised and unconvinced work force, MRC lost the confidence of the staff of its largest institute. This in turn coloured the attitude of NIMR to the future efforts of MRC to consider the issue afresh and contributed significantly to the increasing fragility of their relationship. (Paragraph 35)

7. MRC should be given credit for listening to the Forward Investment Strategy consultation and, contrary to fears in some quarters about the imposition of the FIS proposals, reconsidering its options. The establishment of a Task Force with a remit to start again was the right decision. (Paragraph 36)
8. The evidence we have seen suggests that both Dr Lovell-Badge and Dr Gamblin participated in the Task Force with objectivity and professionalism and handled a difficult situation very well. (Paragraph 41)
9. Given what had gone before with the FIS Subcommittee, it was naive of the MRC Council not to foresee the dangers of asking its Chief Executive to chair a Task Force seeking to undertake a fresh and open-minded review. (Paragraph 44)
10. We conclude that, as far as we can tell, Professor Blakemore handled the meetings of the Task Force with professionalism, objectivity and competence. (Paragraph 45)
11. We believe that the Task Force was sensible in agreeing and publishing a summary after each meeting. The proceedings of the Task Force were more open and transparent than those of many similar bodies and members should be commended for adopting this approach. (Paragraph 49)
12. We recommend that, before reaching any final decision on the future location of NIMR, the MRC Council satisfies itself that it has given full consideration to the availability of funds from all potential sources. (Paragraph 59)
13. We conclude that the Task Force went about its decision making on a future location for NIMR in a rational and coherent manner and are satisfied that it gave due consideration to the benefits of NIMR remaining at Mill Hill for the long term. (Paragraph 64)
14. It was, given the starting positions of Task Force members and the disagreements during its proceedings, a commendable achievement to reach a consensus and agree unanimously on a set of conclusions. (Paragraph 66)
15. At the fifth meeting the Task Force seemed to avoid resolution of the status of Mill Hill as an “active” third option, as a fall back option or neither. In retrospect, this was a major failing of the Task Force as a whole, and in particular of those present at the last meeting. Whilst the focus on the preferred options was understandable, it was remiss of the Task Force not to consider the status of Mill Hill as an option and to leave the position unclear. This failing led to different interpretations of the conclusions of the Task Force and undermined the rest of the process. (Paragraph 75)
16. We conclude that Professor Blakemore did everything he reasonably could to take on board late amendments proposed by NIMR Task Force members whilst preserving the will of the majority on the Task Force. (Paragraph 81)
17. It was extremely regrettable that the Task Force members who agreed the wording of texts at the final meeting, again at the conference call on 25 June and then a third time at the final conference call on 19 July subsequently objected to the words that had been agreed. We can understand the frustration of other members and the

Chairman of the Task Force with the disintegration of the consensus. NIMR staff members of the Task Force did a remarkable job given the pressure they were under and deserve to come out of the process with great credit. However, the unravelling of agreed texts on three occasions suggest that the pressure to renege on agreements reached in the Task Force proved too great and made the job of running the Task Force and achieving consensus almost impossible. (Paragraph 83)

18. We conclude that the failure of the Task Force or MRC to counter authoritatively the fears that NIMR might be closed if the London options failed was a serious error: it contributed further to the uncertainty surrounding the institute's future and contributed to the worsening relations between NIMR staff and MRC. (Paragraph 87)
19. We conclude that the Task Force should have given serious consideration to having a further meeting in order to try to reach an agreed position on whether Mill Hill should be an active third option or a fall back position. The Task Force had already managed to reach a consensus against what must have appeared, at times, to be long odds. Of course, a further meeting may not have been able to reach a form of words that was agreeable to all sides, but, in view of the way in which the Task Force had already worked together to resolve differences of opinion and taking into account the consequences of a divided or minority report, it was worth a try. The Task Force should have considered holding an extra meeting rather than continuing with publication of the report as it stood, if necessary, by asking the MRC Council for more time. (Paragraph 88)
20. We agree with most Task Force members that, given what has happened since, it would not be realistic to reconvene the Task Force at this stage. In view of the very public disagreement there was on the Task Force we believe it unlikely that a re-convened meeting could reach agreement at this stage. (Paragraph 89)
21. We conclude that the publication of the booklet setting out the work being done at NIMR served to align the work of the Task Force with an assessment of the quality of the science at NIMR. (Paragraph 125)

Formal minutes

Wednesday 26 January 2005

Members present:

Dr Ian Gibson, in the Chair

Dr Evan Harris
Dr Brian Iddon

Mr Robert Key
Dr Desmond Turner

The Committee deliberated.

Draft Report (The Medical Research Council's Review of the Future of the National Institute), proposed by the Chairman, brought up and read.

Ordered, That the Chairman's draft Report be read a second time, paragraph by paragraph.

Paragraphs 1 to 135 read and agreed to.

Resolved, That the Report be the Fourth Report of the Committee to the House.

Ordered, That the provisions of Standing Order No. 134 (Select Committee (Reports)) be applied to the Report.

Ordered, That the Chairman do make the Report to the House.

[Adjourned till Monday 31 January at Four o'clock .

Witnesses

Wednesday 1 December 2004

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Sir Anthony Cleaver, Chairman, **Professor Colin Blakemore**, Chief Executive, and **Professor John Savill**, Council Member, Medical Research Council Ev 1

Sir John Skehel, Director, **Dr Robin Lovell-Badge**, Head of Division, Developmental Genetics and Task Force member, and **Dr Steve Gamblin**, Task Force member, National Institute for Medical Research Ev 11

Monday 20 December 2004

Professor Richard A Flavell, Chairman, Section of Immunobiology, Yale University School of Medicine and Task Force member, and **Sir Paul Nurse**, President, Rockefeller University, New York and Task Force Member Ev 19

Monday 10 January 2005

Professor Alan North, Vice-President and Dean, Faculty of Life Sciences, and **Professor Nancy Rothwell**, MRC Research Professor, Vice-President for Research, Faculty of Life Sciences, University of Manchester Ev 29

Professor Stephen Tomlinson, Provost, Wales College of Medicine, Biology, Life and Health Sciences, Deputy Vice Chancellor, Cardiff University and **Professor Kay Davies**, Dr Lee's Professor of Anatomy and Honorary Director, MRC Functional Genetics Unit, Department of Human Anatomy and Genetics, University of Oxford Ev 37

Written Memoranda

1	Medical Research Council	Ev 49, 172
2	John D Spencer	Ev 55
3	Dr William James, Sir William Dunn School of Pathology, University of Oxford	Ev 56
4	N Michael Green, Department of Mathematical Biology, National Institute for Medical Research	Ev 56, 170
5	Jacky Smith, Head Technician in Developmental Biology and Molecular Neurobiology, National Institute for Medical Research	Ev 57
6	Dr J M Wilson and Dr D H Williamson, National Institute for Medical Research	Ev 57
7	Dr Pushpa Bhargava, Centre for Cellular and Molecular Biology, Hyderabad	Ev 57
8	Dr Robb Krumlauf, Scientific Director, Stowers Institute for Medical Research	Ev 59
9	Professor Dr Fritz Melchers, Max Planck Institute for Infection Biology, Berlin	Ev 60
10	Dr Robert B Belshe, Saint Louis University	Ev 60
11	Professor Stafford Lightman, University of Bristol	Ev 61
12	Professor Stephen Challacombe, King's College London	Ev 62
13	Professor Sir David Weatherall, University of Oxford	Ev 62
14	Professor Kay E Davies, former MRC Task Force member on the NIMR	Ev 65
15	Professor A R Bellamy, University of Auckland	Ev 65
16	Professor Andrew Read, University of Edinburgh	Ev 66
17	Dr Michael Oldstone, Scripps Research Institute	Ev 67
18	Dr Robert L Coffman, Dynavax	Ev 67
19	Professor Brian D Sykes, University of Alberta	Ev 68
20	Focus UK	Ev 68
21	Anne McLaren, Gurdon Institute	Ev 69
22	Janet Thornton, European Bioinformatics	Ev 69
23	Dr Peter J M Openshaw, Imperial College London	Ev 70
24	Dr Douglas Robinson, Imperial College London	Ev 70
25	Professor Tony Magee, University of Manchester	Ev 71
26	Professor Richard Flavell, former MRC Task Force member on the NIMR	Ev 72
27	Dr Robin Holliday	Ev 72
28	Professor Alan R North, former MRC Task Force member on the NIMR	Ev 73
29	Professor Peter N Campbell, University College London	Ev 74
30	Professor William Russell, University of Arkansas	Ev 74
31	Professor Anne Cooke, Cambridge University	Ev 75
32	Professor P M Biggs	Ev 76
33	Professor Alan Gilbert, University of Manchester	Ev 77
34	Dr Katie Petty-Saphon, Council of Heads of Medical Schools	Ev 77
35	Professor Stephen Tomlinson, former MRC Task Force member on the NIMR	Ev 77
36	Professor N J Rothwell, former MRC Task Force member on the NIMR	Ev 78
37	Professor Simon Howell, King's College London	Ev 79
38	Dr Jonathan Cooke	Ev 80, 171
39	Professor Thomas A Steitz, Yale University	Ev 82
40	Jackie Wilbraham	Ev 83
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42	Professor Trevor Jones, King's College London	Ev 85
43	Professor Adrian Newland, Royal College of Pathologists	Ev 85
44	Dr E M Armstrong, Chief Medical Officer, Scotland	Ev 86
45	Professor Olugbemiro, University College Hospital, Ibadan, Nigeria	Ev 87
46	Dr R Henderson, MRC Laboratory of Molecular Biology	Ev 88
47	Professor Neil Brockendorff, MRC Clinical Sciences Centre	Ev 90
48	Professor Dario Alessi, University of Dundee	Ev 90
49	Career Track Scientists at the National Institute for Medical Research	Ev 91
50	International Centre for Genetic Engineering and Biotechnology	Ev 92
51	Dr Anthony Holder, Medical Research Council	Ev 93
52	Professor John Walker, Medical Research Council	Ev 94
53	Professor Peter Weissberg, Cambridge University	Ev 95
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56	Dr Jamshed R Tata, National Institute for Medical Research	Ev 96
57	Professor Dafydd Walters, St George's Hospital Medical School	Ev 98
58	Professor Elizabeth Simpson, MRC Clinical Sciences Centre	Ev 98
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63	Amicus	Ev 104
64	Anna O'Garra, National Institute for Medical Research	Ev 105
65	Robert Solari, Medical Research Council Technology	Ev 108
66	Professor Hindmarsh and Dr Dattani, University College London	Ev 110
67	Professor Jim Smith, Cambridge University	Ev 112
68	Kenneth Fleming, University of Oxford	Ev 113
69	Dr E F Gevers, National Institute for Medical Research	Ev 114
70	Steven Ley, National Institute for Medical Research	Ev 116
71	Gordon Reid, National Institute for Medical Research	Ev 117
72	Professor B Askomas, Imperial College London	Ev 118
73	Professor Sanjeev Khrishna, St George's Hospital Medical School	Ev 118
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75	Professor Grant and Professor Trainer, University College London	Ev 121
76	Professor Grahame Bullfield, University of Edinburgh	Ev 121
77	Professor Andrew Michael, John Radcliffe Hospital, Oxford	Ev 122
78	Professor Christopher Edwards, University of Newcastle-upon-Tyne	Ev 123
79	Professor Guy Dodson, University of York	Ev 124
80	Professor Sir Paul Nurse, former MRC Task Force member on the NIMR	Ev 128
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84	National Institute of Health	Ev 132
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86	Elizabeth Hirst	Ev 134

87	Dr Steve Gamblin, former MRC Task Force member on the NIMR	Ev 135
88	Heads of Division Committee, National Institute for Medical Research	Ev 137
89	Professor Peter Rigby, Institute of Cancer Research	Ev 139
90	Dr Ralph Schoepfer, University College London	Ev 140
91	Professor Robert Liddington, Burnham Institute, La Jolla, California	Ev 141
92	Langhorne Laboratory	Ev 142
93	Dr Robin Lovell-Badge, former MRC Task Force member on the NIMR	Ev 143
94	Dr Justin Molloy, National Institute for Medical Research	Ev 146
95	Professor Amanda Fisher, Clinical Sciences Centre, Hammersmith Hospital	Ev 149
96	Professor Dame Louise Johnson, University of Oxford	Ev 150
97	Dr Hazel Dockrell, London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine	Ev 150
98	Professor Chris Higgins, MRC Clinical Sciences Centre	Ev 151
99	Professor Sir Philip Cohen, University of Dundee	Ev 152
100	Professor Iain Robinson, National Institute for Medical Research	Ev 153
101	BioIndustry Association	Ev 155
102	Professor Andrew Garner, University of Manchester	Ev 156
103	Sir David Cooksey, Advent Venture Partners	Ev 157
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106	Academy of Medical Sciences	Ev 161
107	Professor Critchley and Professor Calder, University of Edinburgh	Ev 162
108	Professor John Bell, University of Oxford	Ev 162
109	Professor James Fawcett, Cambridge University	Ev 163
110	Professor Tony Minson, Department of Pathology, Cambridge University	Ev 164
111	Professor Frank Grosveld, Erasmus Medical Center, Rotterdam	Ev 164
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113	David Kerr, NTRAC	Ev 165
114	Professor John Bell, University of Oxford	Ev 166
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116	David Smith, former Secretary to the MRC Task Force on NIMR	Ev 168
117	Professor Edwin Taylor,	Ev 169
118	Alison Spaul, Director, Chief Scientist Office, Edinburgh	Ev 169
119	Professor Richard R Denton, former MRC Task Force member on the NIMR	Ev 169
120	Sir John Skehel, Director, National Institute for Medical Research	Ev 173
121	Sir Anthony Cleaver, Chairman, Medical Research Council	Ev 180
122	Professor Colin Blakemore, Chief Executive, Medical Research Council	Ev 180, 186, 188, 212, 221, 241
123	Fiona Fox Director, Science Media Centre	Ev 222
124	Email correspondence, between Task Force members, not in the public domain but referred to in the Report	Ev 223

List of unprinted written evidence

Additional papers have been received from the following and have been reported to the House but to save printing costs they have not been printed, and copies have been placed in the House of Commons Library, where they may be inspected by Members. Other copies are in the Record Office, House of Lords and are available to the public for inspection. Requests for inspection should be addressed to the Record Office, House of Lords, London SW1. (Tel 020 7219 3074/2333/5316). Hours of inspection are from 9:30am to 5:00pm on Mondays to Fridays.

Email correspondence between MRC Task Force Members (November 2003-June 2004)

Email correspondence between MRC Task Force Members with annotations by Professor Colin Blakemore, Chief Executive, Medical Research Council (June-October 2004)

Professor Colin Blakemore's response to Dr Lovell-Badge's further submission (NIM 116K)

Reports from the Science and Technology Committee since 2001

Session 2004-05

First Report	The Work of the Economic and Social Research Council	HC 13
Second Report	Annual Report 2004	HC 199
Third Report	Office of Science and Technology: Scrutiny Report 2005	HC 8

Session 2003-04

First Report	Annual Report 2003	HC 169
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Fifth Report	<i>Too Little too late?</i> Government Investment in Nanotechnology (<i>Reply HC 650</i>)	HC 56
Sixth Report	Within REACH: the EU's new chemicals strategy (<i>Reply HC 895</i>)	HC 172
Seventh Report	Director General for Higher Education: Introductory Hearing (<i>Reply HC 1015</i>)	HC 461
Eighth Report	The Work of the Council for the Central Laboratory of the Research Councils (<i>Reply HC 1199</i>)	HC 462
Ninth Report	Director General of the Research Councils: Introductory Hearing (<i>Reply HC 1059</i>)	HC 577
Tenth Report	Scientific Publications: Free for all?	HC 399
Eleventh Report	Research Assessment Exercise: a re-assessment (<i>Reply HC 34, 2004-05</i>)	HC 586
Twelfth Report	Government support for Beagle 2	HC 711
Thirteenth Report	The Use of Science in UK International Development Policy	HC 133
Fourteenth Report	Responses to the Committee's Tenth Report, Session 2003-04, Scientific Publications: Free for all? (<i>Reply HC 249, 2004-05</i>)	HC 1200

Session 2002-03

First Report	The Work of the Particle Physics and Astronomy Research Council (<i>Reply HC 507</i>)	HC 161
Second Report	Annual Report 2002	HC 260
Third Report	The Work of the Medical Research Council (<i>Reply Cm 5834</i>)	HC 132
Fourth Report	Towards a Non-Carbon Fuel Economy: Research, Development and Demonstration (<i>Reply HC 745</i>)	HC 55

Fifth Report	The Work of the Natural Environment Research Council <i>(Reply HC 1161)</i>	HC 674
Sixth Report	UK Science and Europe: Value for Money? <i>(Reply HC 1162)</i>	HC 386
Seventh Report	Light Pollution and Astronomy <i>(Reply HC 127, 2003-04)</i>	HC 747
Eighth Report	The Scientific Response to Terrorism <i>(Reply Cm 6108)</i>	HC 415
Ninth Report	The Work of the Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council. <i>(Reply HC 169, 2003-04)</i>	HC 936

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First Report	Cancer Research – A Follow-Up <i>(Reply Cm 5532)</i>	HC 444
Second Report	The Research Assessment Exercise <i>(Reply HC 995)</i>	HC 507
Third Report	Science Education from 14 to 19 <i>(Reply HC 1204)</i>	HC 508
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