

# A new UK research funding agency

11<sup>th</sup> November 2019

Summary provided by [Dods](#).

## Witnesses

First session

- Professor Dame Ottoline Leyser, chief executive, UK Research and Innovation (UKRI)
- Sir John Kingman, chair, UK Research and Innovation (UKRI)

Second session

- Amanda Solloway, Minister for Science, Research and Innovation, Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy
- Sarah Hodgetts, deputy director for UKRI Sponsorship and Advanced Research Projects Agency, Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy

## Overview

The focus of ARPA and its experimental motivation was outlined to the committee with the minister pressing the case for an Agency to have the freedom to make its own discoveries.

## Summary

First session

Funding

Opening the session looking at her vision for UKRI, chief executive, Professor Dame Ottoline Leyser, described how she saw UKRI to connect the whole spectrum of research areas and provide a much more fluid environment to fuel the knowledge economy . She told the committee that the UKRI, like all other government bodies, were in the throes of the spending settlement and did not yet know their

budget noting that she would welcome a more long term budget settlement in order to make long term plans and investments for the future.

She illustrated the benefits that a four year settlement could bring to the research sector in order to drive forward the confidence in the knowledge economy as well as draw in private sector funding.

Sir John Kingman, chair of UKRI noted the strong commitments made by the government to research funding and noted that he believed that they understood the case for a multi-year settlement.

### Modern industrial strategy

Andrew Griffith MP (Con) described the purpose of UKRI being central to the UK's industrial strategy. Leyser pressed the key role of research and innovation in the UK's industrial strategy to support prosperity and high quality public services and economic growth as a whole. Research and innovation under an umbrella of a single organisation only seeks to drive this purpose forward, she asserted.

Leyser went on to state her aim of integrating horizon scanning more firmly in to UKRI's forward planning. Kingman added that the UKRI should be looking to take grown up decisions to prioritise parts of the portfolio and made the decisions to cut those parts that did not work so well.

### ARPA

Katherine Fletcher MP (Con) raised the topic of ARPA and asked whether this was needed in the system or whether UKRI already filled this role. Kingman stated that there absolutely was a case for this type of organisation, whether that came inside or outside of the UKRI structure.

Leyser went on to consider the different funding models that UKRI could explore with ARPA but asserted that it was very important for a percentage of the UK's research and development spend to be earmarked for experimental research.

On the merits of using the ARPA model as opposed to others, Leyser stated that the institute type model, as adopted by Howard Hughes, was more of a single focus approach and should be considered as an addition rather than instead of. She expressed support for creating a pot of money to be made available for visionary type researchers and acknowledge that there were a variety of ways that this could be facilitated.

Leyser went on to assert that while she could not foresee the objectives of UKRI fulfilling this experimental role, there had been significant changes in the research landscape and that she was very excited by the prospect of what that could bring.

Aaron Bell MP (Con) went on to ask the representative from UKRI whether the ARPA type model should have a specific type focus or a more generalist approach. Leyser stated that she foresaw the drive of the organisation bringing together more experimental researchers with the core focus to bring the right people in for a collective challenge.

Kingman pointed out that whatever structure the government chose for ARPA, whether within or externally to UKRI, they would make it work.

## Second session

Amanda Solloway MP, Minister for Science, Research and Innovation laid out her plans to the committee, detailing her road map for R&D and highlighted BEIS' responses to Covid-19 to support innovation.

On the government plans for the new Agency, the minister asserted her focus to ensure this Agency would be fit for purpose and described her close work with stakeholders on this in order to support all of the ambition on this to ensure this was a long term focus for the science environment. She noted that no final decisions had been taken on the timelines for this Agency.

Graham Stringer MP (Lab) asked about the consultations the government had taken on ARPA. The ministers pressed the point that ARPA had to be fit for purpose for the UK so that they were currently taking lots of views to ensure that the right foundations were in place. There was a great need for an ARPA type agency, the minister asserted and noted the challenges to make it robust and fit for purpose.

The challenges were make it high-vision and high-reward, Solloway described and asserted the importance to give the Agency the freedom to make its own discoveries. She emphasised that scientists, rather than politicians, needed to be the ones to lead the way on this in order to deliver transformational science. She went on to tell the committee that the hope was that the funding opportunity would be as agile as having private investment .

Sarah Hodgetts, deputy director for UKRI Sponsorship and Advanced Research Projects Agency, illustrated their conversations with DARPA and leading scientists to learn how to deliver their vision.

She went on to say that one of the key challenges that ARPA looked to address was to be a bigger competitor in the global science and technology race.

In response to Carol Monaghan MP (SNP) who queried the cost of the project without clear and specific tasks and targets, Solloway outlined to the committee that this project presented the opportunities that were not already being explored and reiterated her intention for scientists to lead all the projects in order to support the most ambitious long term science. The minister asserted the ambition to fund long term financial investment but stressed the agile nature of the fund that could stop projects that were seen not to be working.

Appointments to the agency were still being worked through; the minister told the committee and stressed that importance of finding visionaries with clear leadership skills with an appetite for challenges. Hodgetts added that remuneration for this role would be reflective of the challenges the appointee would be expected to undertake.

On the gaps that the Agency would be trying to fill in the current landscape; the minister indicated again that this would be led by scientists to attempt and enable research that would not be ordinarily able. She emphasised the ambition for a lack of bureaucracy within the Agency and reiterated the success that would come from the agile nature of the organisation and stressed again that this was not simply a funding agency but would enable research that would not normally be able to be carried out.

Hodgetts noted that despite not just being a funding agency, it would have the freedom to experiment with funding models.

Fletcher asked about the government's confidence to be able to reach and appeal to those who were able to think outside the box. The minister expressed assuredly that this would happen.