From: NR
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CMO: Chief Scientist Office
30 September 2020

**Cabinet Secretary for Health and Sport**

**CHIEF SCIENTIST OFFICE – FUNDING CALL FOR SCOTTISH-LED RESEARCH ON LONGER-TERM EFFECTS OF COVID-19 INFECTION**

## Purpose

1. To agree to a proposed research call from CSO that will invite applications for Scottish-led projects investigating the longer-term effects of COVID-19 infection, and provide a summary update on the use of COVID-19 emergency research funding to date.

## Priority

2. Urgent - We would like to be in a position to launch the call as soon as possible.

## Background

3. The Chief Scientist Office (CSO) provides funding to the Scottish Health Boards and Universities to provide resources, service support and employ staff working in clinical research environments across the NHS in Scotland. CSO also directly funds research in key areas of health and social care through grants awarded via our response mode committees. Following your agreement, CSO issued a Rapid Research in COVID-19 (RARC-19) funding call earlier in the pandemic which delivered a portfolio of 56 short-term projects addressing key questions pertinent to increasing understanding of the pandemic.[1] This call was in addition to Scottish involvement, utilising CSO and NHS Research Scotland support to Scottish Health Boards, in priority UK-wide COVID-19 related studies funded by UKRI/NIHR including on understanding clinical risk factors for COVID-19, and trials of treatments and vaccines.

4. As the pandemic has progressed, there has been an increase in clinical awareness of longer-term effects of COVID-19 infection which has been referred to as 'long-COVID' and that are experienced by a significant subset of patients. On 7 September 2020, the British Medical Journal published a definition of long-Covid as "not recovering for several weeks or months following the start of symptoms that were suggestive of Covid, whether you were tested or not".[2] Currently data are limited on the prevalence and nature of long-COVID to inform clinical management and support rehabilitation. An estimate derived from self-reported data collected by the Zoe COVID-19 symptom app suggests 1 in 10 people may still have symptoms after three weeks, and some may suffer for months and potentially longer.[3] Thus, the cohort of patients experiencing long-COVID may be expected to grow as the pandemic continues.

5. This emerging area was not specifically covered in the early CSO call for rapid research. Furthermore, only a limited number of research funding calls have been launched by other funders that include longer term symptomology within their remit.

Scotland is participating in the UK-wide PHOSP-COVID study funded by UKRI and led by the University of Leicester that is looking at how different patients recover from COVID-19, why some people recover more quickly than others, and which treatments may be helpful. However, beyond this large study there is scope for smaller targeted projects to address unanswered and researchable questions. Furthermore, the PHOSP-COVID study is intended to provide a platform for such additional studies.

6. In light of this, CSO proposes to launch a call for research in Scotland to address some of the questions around long term effects of COVID-19 infection. While the RARC-19 call was broad in scope, this is targeted to a more defined area of unmet research need where CSO funding could have significant impact.

7. The call would look to fund projects designed to improve understanding of the longer term effects of COVID-19 infection on physical and mental health and wellbeing in Scotland, and/or research with the aim of developing effective clinical interventions to support recovery and rehabilitation.

8. Studies within remit would include: clinical evaluation of diagnostic, prognostic and precision medicine approaches to long COVID-19; development and evaluation of treatment and rehabilitation strategies; research to increase the knowledge base around lived experience of long term COVID-19 infection sequalae.

9. A call could be managed without additional financial pressures within the current level of CSO budget since CSO did not progress (due to the pandemic) with a scheduled round of research grant funding that had been planned in June 2020. With CSO's usual funding limit for individual projects applied of up to £300,000, around 6-8 projects could be funded through this call, subject to the costs of individual projects and independent expert review of their quality. A draft text for the research call is at Annex A. This has been circulated to health and social care policy teams who along with DCMO and the Chief Scientist for Health are supportive of the call.

10. If issued, applications to this call would be reviewed by an independent expert panel that would be convened by CSO. Our aim would be to issue the call soon with a relatively short deadline for applications with decisions on funding made rapidly in order for projects to start as soon as possible. CSO would liaise with colleagues across the Health and Social Care Directorates and in Public Health Scotland to facilitate translating the knowledge that accumulates from this research programme into policy and practice. This approach has already been successfully adopted for the RARC-19 call.

**NHS Research Scotland Emergency Research Funding 2020-21: Service Support Fund**

11. In addition, earlier this year you approved the establishment of a £3.3m Covid-19 Service Support Fund. CSO adopted an approach which was bespoke to individual trials and studies. This featured a mix of upfront resource and agreed patient recruitment premium payments which will be provided in arrears in the light of actual patient recruitment. Funding will be made available only in 2020-21. To avoid any future distortion it will not count toward the NHS Research Scotland usual activity base.

12. To date around £1m has been committed. A further £1.6m has been earmarked to meet the Service Support costs of the SIREN study that is examining the impact of detectable anti SARS-COV2 antibody on the incidence of COVID-19 in healthcare workers. The balance will support pressures around the cost of data collection.

**Conclusion**

13. The Cabinet Secretary is invited to:

- Note the intention of CSO to launch a call for research on the longer-term effects of COVID-19 infection and that the cost of the call can be incorporated within CSO's current budget.
- Agree that CSO proceed with the call announcement.
- Note the commitments in respect to the Covid-19 Service Support Fund

[1]https://www.cso.scot.nhs.uk/rapid-research-in-covid-19-programme/
[2]https://www.bmj.com/content/370/bmj.m3489
[3]https://covid.joinzoe.com/post/covid-long-term

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| Copy List: | For Action | For Comments | For Information | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | Portfolio Interest | Constit Interest | General Awareness |
| Minister for Mental Health | | | X | | X |
| Minister for Public Health, Sport and Wellbeing | | | X | | X |
| Minister for Further Education, Higher Education and Science | | | | | X |

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| DG Health & Social Care |
| Chief Medical Officer |
| Chief Scientist (Health) |
| Chief Nursing Officer |
| DCMO |
| COVID-19 Policy |
| COVID-Clinical Cell Secretariat |
| COVID-19 Communications |
| Chief Scientific Advisor |
| Head of HSCA |

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NR – Comms Healthier
Richard McCallum – Interim Director of Health Finance and Governance
NR – Health Finance
NR – Health Finance
NR – Advanced Learning and Science
NR – DMH-COVID-19 Response Hub
NR – Head of CSO
NR – CSO
NR - CSO

**ANNEX A**

**CSO COVID-19 RESEARCH FUNDING PROPOSAL – call announcement text**
**APPLIED RESEARCH ON LONGER-TERM EFFECTS OF COVID-19 INFECTION**

CSO is launching a call for applied research proposals designed to improve understanding of the longer term effects of COVID-19 infection on physical and mental health and wellbeing in Scotland, and/or research with the aim of developing effective clinical interventions to support recovery and rehabilitation from COVID-19 infection.

Studies within remit would include: clinical evaluation of diagnostic, prognostic and precision medicine approaches to long COVID-19 (defined as not recovering for several weeks or months following the start of symptoms); development and evaluation of treatment and rehabilitation strategies; research to increase the knowledge base around lived experience of long term COVID-19 infection sequalae.

This call is not to support: hypothesis-generating basic research on the molecular, cellular and/or physiological mechanisms underlying long COVID; nor is it to support wider research relating to COVID-19 such as into the impacts of social distancing/lockdown measures on health and wellbeing.

The funding available for individual projects is up to £300,000 at 80% full economic cost. CSO expects to be in a position to fund around 6 such projects through this call. CSO standard terms and conditions of grant and applicant eligibility criteria apply.

Cross disciplinary collaborative proposals are welcomed as are studies that build on or extend existing studies in Scotland. Funded applications will need to start within 3 months of award. Applications should be submitted along with a letter of support from the host institution confirming that the research can be conducted within this timeframe and, where support of the NHS for use of resources is required, the research can be supported by the territorial Health Board(s) or special Health Board(s) involved. Applications that are within remit of this current call are not eligible for consideration by the CSO response mode committees' January 2021 application round. These committees will accept other COVID-19 related research applications that are within their individual remits, but out with the scope of the current call.

CSO is not operating a two stage application process for this call; there will no outline application stage. Applications to this call should be made using the full application form. Furthermore, applications submitted to this call will be peer-reviewed by a bespoke independent expert panel to be convened by CSO. Applicants should therefore ensure that applications can be well understood and evaluated by scientific and medical researchers who may not be specialists in the particular area of the application.