

Minutes of the 33rd meeting of NERC Council in UK Research and Innovation (redacted)

NATURAL ENVIRONMENT RESEARCH COUNCIL

Thirty-third meeting of NERC Council in UK Research and Innovation, held at the Royal Society, London on Thursday, 11 June 2026.

Members present:

Professor Louise Heathwaite (Chair), Cathrine Armour, Professor Richard Bardgett, Alice Bunn, Professor Peter Cox, Professor Kevin Gaston, Professor Gideon Henderson, Professor Anna Hogg, Michael Lewis, Professor Dan Parsons (part)

Observers:

Christine Foster, NERC Non-Executive Director, Professor Ally Lewis, Chair, NERC Science and Innovation Committee, Dr Justine Betja, Deputy CSA, Defra

NERC Directors (Head Office): Kim Bond (NERC Chief Operating Officer), Jen Jamieson-Ball (Director, Major Programmes and Estates), Dr Rupert Lewis (NERC Deputy Executive Chair), Wendy Selby-Brown (NERC Finance Business Partner), Michaela Simpson (NERC Director, People, Culture and Operations), Dr Iain Williams (Director, Strategic Partnerships)

Apologies: Professor Anjali Goswami, Professor Emily Shuckburgh, Kim Shillinglaw

Other attendees: Liam Haydon (item 3), Ollie Darke (item 4), Julianne Pigott (items 5 and 6), Candy Snelling (item 8), Joel Herzig (item 9)

Secretariat: Helen Page, Katrina Lewis

Introductory items

1. Executive Chair's welcome, unconfirmed minutes of the 32nd meeting of NERC Council and Action Log (NERC 26/10, NERC 26/11)

- 1.1 Louise Heathwaite welcomed members to the thirty-third meeting of NERC Council and reminded members that information discussed at Council meetings should remain confidential. She noted that apologies had been received for the meeting from Anjali Goswami, Emily Shuckburgh and Kim Shillinglaw.
- 1.2 Louise Heathwaite welcomed Alice Bunn, Professor Anna Hogg and Professor Dan Parsons to their first meeting since assuming their roles on 1 April.
- 1.3 Louise Heathwaite advised Council that this would be the last meeting for Iain Williams and thanked him for his valuable contribution to NERC over the past six years.
- 1.4 Louise Heathwaite reminded members to advise Helen Page of any updates to their Declaration of Interests.

- 1.5 Louise Heathwaite asked if there were any vested interests in any of the items being discussed today. None were declared.
- 1.6 Louise Heathwaite asked members for any amendments and matters arising from the minutes of the previous meeting. No amendments were made, and the minutes of the thirty-second meeting were confirmed as an accurate record.

Gideon Henderson asked for an update on the FAAM decommissioning. Rupert Lewis explained that decommissioning was in progress and informed Council that the Science and Innovation Advisory Committee (SIAC) was undertaking a review of atmospheric science.

Gideon Henderson asked whether there was an update on the proposal to look again at whether PhD students might be funded through grants. Louise Heathwaite explained that this would not be possible as this decision would need to be made at UKRI level.

Gideon Henderson asked whether there was a list of the successful infrastructure fund proposals and it was agreed to share this once available.

ACTION: list of successful infrastructure funding to be circulated once available

2. NERC Council Retreat (Oral) *Slide, item 2*

- 2.1 Liam Haydon introduced this item which provided an opportunity to reflect on the NERC Council retreat held the previous day.
- 2.2 Liam Haydon outlined the key themes which had been discussed at the Council retreat, presenting a visual illustration which had captured discussion under the following headings:
- commercialisation
 - talent and skills
 - participant-led sessions: international partnerships; data as a service; nature, defence and the industrial strategy; philanthropic funding

- 2.3 Louise Heathwaite suggested that all three visual illustrations be circulated for the benefit of new members.

ACTION: visual illustrations from 2024-2026 to be circulated

- 2.4 Liam Haydon invited Council to share reflections on the retreat and to highlight anything that might be missing from the illustration.
- 2.5 Council agreed that the retreat had been a success, had been well-structured and interactive. In discussion, the following points were highlighted:
- there was a suggestion that a mechanism be established to capture ideas from the wider community on international partnerships
 - it was suggested that it would be useful to have further information on the key employers for NERC graduates, both now and in the future
 - the importance of getting the maximum return from environmental data

3. Executive Chair's Update (Oral)

- 3.1 Louise Heathwaite informed Council that the UKRI CEO was due to appear in front of the Public Accounts Committee to provide evidence on investment in research infrastructure.
- 3.2 Louise Heathwaite commented that work continued at pace to implement the new UKRI allocations model and demonstrate the value of R&D investment. She added that the budget for NERC in 2026/27 was now agreed and included funding for both Clean Energy and Climate Adaptation, Environment and Resilience (CAER) for which she was Senior

Responsible Owner (SRO).

- 3.3 Louise Heathwaite informed Council that a UKRI hybrid working policy had been launched, adding that a programme, 'Shaping our Future,' had also been initiated which would involve reviewing operating models across UKRI to ensure the organisation had the right skills and capacity in the right places to deliver the UKRI mission. She added that a new costing model would be implemented from April 2027 which would comprise direct and indirect costs and would facilitate matrix working across UKRI.
- 3.4 Louise Heathwaite noted that the role of Executive Director, Science, was now open to applications, adding that the role would have oversight of all NERC funding pathways. She added that the NERC Deputy Executive Chair would continue his role as observer for the research centre boards to ensure consistency.
- 3.5 Louise Heathwaite noted that the university visits had been helpful and extended an open invitation to Council members to also attend these visits as ambassadors and invited members to suggest locations for future visits.
- 3.6 Louise Heathwaite explained that the IS8 Clean Energy Delivery Plan would be provided to Executive Committee this month for scrutiny. She added that a workshop was planned for July on CAER.
- 3.7 Louise Heathwaite informed Council that a Clean Energy Programme Director, Helen Randell, had been appointed and would start in August 2026.
- 3.8 Council asked when the Programme Director for CAER might be appointed and Louise Heathwaite commented that recruitment was likely to start at the end of the summer.

Items for discussion

4. Antarctic Airbridge (Oral) Slides, item 4

- 4.1 Kim Bond introduced this item to provide an update on changes to the Antarctic Airbridge. She explained that the British Antarctic Survey (BAS) operated Dash-7 would retire from service in March 2027 which would result in a gap in provision and it was, therefore, necessary to implement an interim operating model. Kim Bond outlined some of the background related to the replacement aircraft for the benefit of the new members and outlined the current situation with the contractor.
- 4.2 Ollie Darke, Director of Polar Operations, BAS, provided some additional context related to the airbridge gap including future considerations related to climate change and the BAS Future Staffing project for Antarctic Deployment.
- 4.3 Ollie Darke outlined that significant preparation for the change had included creating supply chain capacity by building new marine logistics delivery partners, through both commercial contract services and international partnerships.
- 4.4 Council asked whether the potential for international partnership agreements had been explored to directly replace the airbridge aircraft. Ollie Darke explained that this option was being delivered for airborne cargo movements to Rothera, but routine passenger movements were not being taken forward due to the limited types of aircraft available.

5. NERC Sankey Diagram (Oral) Slide, item 5

- 5.1 Louise Heathwaite introduced this item, adding that the diagram had been produced at the request of Council, following the publication of the UKRI Sankey Diagram in March.

- 5.2 Julianne Pigott talked through the NERC Allocations Model for 2026/27 which was moving from an input model to an outcome focused model aligned to the UKRI allocations 'bucket' model. Wendy Selby-Brown added that the diagram provided a snapshot which would be subject to change over the financial year.
- 5.3 Council welcomed sight of the NERC Sankey Diagram and noted the re-distribution of budgets which was required under the new allocations model.

6. NERC Management Dashboard (NERC 26/12) Slides, item 6

- 6.1 Kim Bond introduced this item, explaining that the management dashboard had been refreshed and refined since Council last saw it. Kim Bond added that the dashboard was used to support management decisions and identify trends, noting that some information contained within it was sensitive and not for sharing further.
- 6.2 Julianne Pigott explained that the dashboard would continue to evolve in line with UKRI strategy and as NERC's data capability matured. She outlined the five priorities within the UKRI performance and assurance framework:
- discovery/curiosity-driven science
 - IS8 and government priorities
 - innovation
 - ecosystem, place, infrastructure and international
 - organisational transformation
- 6.3 Julianne Pigott informed Council that this was the second iteration of the redesigned dashboard, adding that it would continue to evolve and improve, including using benchmarking and tracking against the Head Office Business Plan.
- 6.4 Julianne Pigott provided further detail on priority 2 (IS8 and government priorities) including co-investment and private sector leverage for NERC research grants over a five-year period, noting that a significant amount of leverage came from within the clean energy portfolio.
- 6.5 Ally Lewis asked about the data sources which were used to measure private sector leverage. Julianne Pigott explained that the data came via grant applications and Researchfish but there would need to be additional monitoring going forward.
- 6.6 Council welcomed sight of the management dashboard. Council asked whether the information was collated manually or automatically. Julianne Pigott responded that it was currently predominantly via manual collation, but it was envisaged that the process would become more automated.

7. Funding Calls (Oral) Slides, item 7

- 7.1 Rupert Lewis introduced this item, explaining that one of the key themes from the recent university visits had been an interest in knowing what funding calls were available. He outlined a range of current open and anticipated calls within NERC and added that UKRI was planning to launch a longer-term pipeline planner in June 2026 (note: [Future research and innovation funding opportunities – UKRI](#)).
- 7.2 Council asked whether there was any similar analysis related to PhD opportunities. Louise Heathwaite commented that, as this was led by UKRI, this would need to be investigated further.
- 7.3 Council asked how the community might input ideas given the change to Highlight Topics. Rupert Lewis explained that ideas might be fed in via the 'Exploring the Frontiers'

programme. Louise Heathwaite added that 'Transcending the Frontiers' would be another route, and the importance of commercialisation was also noted.

7.4 Council asked how the longer-term pipeline plan would be different from the list of current opportunities. Rupert Lewis explained that the plan would provide a 12-month forward look and it was noted that new opportunities arising from the IS8 programmes would also be included in the pipeline plan.

7.5 Deputy CSA, Defra referenced the anticipated call related to innovation in sensing (atmospheric/marine) and offered to help Defra to engage with this.

8. NERC Estates Transformation (Oral) Slides, item 8

8.1 Jen Jamieson-Ball introduced this item which was to provide an update on the current condition of the UK NERC estate and the need for investment to protect long term science delivery. She added that a UKRI Estates Strategy was in development with NERC engagement and influenced via the NERC Chief Operating Officer.

8.2 Candy Snelling, NERC Associate Director, Estates and Sustainability, explained that a 2026 survey had shown that the condition of the NERC UK estate had deteriorated considerably since the previous survey in 2021, adding that there was an opportunity, over the next Spending Review period, to address this.

8.3 Candy Snelling explained that it was intended to launch a NERC Estates Transformation Programme with a ring-fenced budget over the next four years and outlined the UKRI expectations and wider considerations.

8.4 Council agreed that investment in estate was important, as an essential enabler for science, and asked whether any consideration had been given to whether some sites might be sold to raise additional funds where consolidation was taking place.

8.5 Council asked for some clarity on the status of the independent research centres regarding estate. Louise Heathwaite confirmed that UKRI retained ownership of these.

8.6 Council asked whether it might be useful to conduct an analysis of future space requirements by working with centres on priorities. It added that it would also be worth considering partnering with other organisations where space was not fully utilised.

9. UKRI Strategy (Oral) Slides, item 9

9.1 Joel Herzig, Deputy Director, UKRI Investment Strategy, introduced this item to provide an update on the development of the new UKRI strategy.

9.2 Joel Herzig explained that, following the launch of the new UKRI mission, the UKRI strategy was due to be published in the summer 2026 and would consist of five chapters:

- supporting basic and curiosity-driven research
- addressing strategic government and societal priorities
- helping companies start, scale and stay
- strengthening the foundations of the R&I system
- reforming our organisation

9.3 Joel Herzig informed Council that a UKRI Delivery Plan for 2026/27 would also be available outlining in more detail how UKRI would deliver on its new strategy and mission. He added that delivery plans for the priority programmes aligned with the IS8 sectors were also being prepared.

- 9.4 Council asked whether the strategy would clearly outline that the funding included in 'bucket 1' included both curiosity-driven research and Research England funding. Joel Herzig explained that it would, noting it would likely be presented at a high level rather than in detail.
- 9.5 Ally Lewis asked whether the strategy would include detail on the IS8 sectors. Joel Herzig explained that there would be some detail although this would be in greater detail within the delivery plans.
- 9.6 Council asked how the NERC community might take advantage of the opportunities which might come from the priority programmes. Joel Herzig confirmed that the programmes were cross-UKRI and intended to harness the breadth of the UKRI community.

10. NERC Council Finance Report (NERC 26/08)

- 10.1 Wendy Selby-Brown introduced this item and outlined the position for the previous and current financial years.
- 10.2 Wendy Selby-Brown informed Council that NERC had a balanced budget in 2025/26. She added that she had worked closely with the British Antarctic Survey (BAS) and British Geological Survey (BGS) to ensure a balanced position at the end of the financial year.
- 10.3 Wendy Selby-Brown informed Council that an audit of NERC was currently in progress.
- 10.4 Wendy-Selby Brown explained that the allocation for 2026/27 was as outlined in the NERC Sankey Diagram discussed earlier. She added that this budget did not include Official Development Assistance (ODA)/non-ODA.
- 10.5 Wendy Selby-Brown outlined that there continued to be issues with Oracle Fusion as well as the risk to fuel cost caused by the Middle East conflict, noting that forward purchasing of fuel required approval by the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology.
- 10.6 Council asked whether NERC was able to influence the allocation for international funding. Louise Heathwaite explained that the international budget was overseen by AHRC and agreed it might be useful to explore opportunities further.
- 10.7 Council asked what the international priorities were so that NERC might seek partnership funding. It was agreed to ask Frances Wood, Director, UKRI International, to join a future Council meeting to provide further detail on international funding.
- 10.8 Council asked whether there was a list of potential ideas ready to offset any underspend. Wendy Selby-Brown confirmed this was the case and noted that the list was routinely reviewed.
- 10.9 Louise Heathwaite thanked Wendy Selby-Brown and her team for their help in maintaining a balanced budget.

11. NERC Council Quarterly Risk Review

- 11.1 Michaela Simpson introduced this item, informing Council that there had been no significant changes to the top objective risk scores since Council last met. She added that three new strategic risks had been added:
- FAAM Aircraft de-commissioning
 - Centre Agreement Project
 - Geopolitical events

- 11.2 Michaela Simpson informed Council that work on security and resilience compliance was continuing. She reminded Council that the NERC Assurance Board (NAB) had now been stood down and NAB had suggested that any future risk papers to Council focused on key risks and mitigations that were appropriate for Council discussion.
- 11.3 Michaela Simpson added that a new Associate Director for Corporate Governance and Stewardship had been appointed and would start in July.
- 11.4 Council commented that the key risks outlined within the paper were clear, adding that the mitigating actions might still be made clearer. Kim Bond agreed to look at ways in which this might be improved.
- 11.5 Council asked whether there was a risk related to potential major funding cuts. Louise Heathwaite noted that this would be a risk held at UKRI level. She asked Council to help in identifying activities which might be stopped if this materialised, including an analysis of interdependencies.
- 11.6 Council asked where the risk associated with the Antarctic Airbridge was captured in the risk report. Kim Bond explained that this was a sub risk within the infrastructure risk, adding that this was now considered an issue rather than a risk. It was agreed to provide more info on the process of risk identification at a future meeting.
- 11.7 Council asked whether there was a risk related to the pace of change across UKRI. Louise Heathwaite informed Council that this was a UKRI level risk related to the 'Shaping our Future' programme. Michaela Simpson added that there was a NERC sub-risk on organisational change. Council suggested that a risk be added on key personnel changes, including at the research centres, and how this might impact on the ability to deliver successfully.

12. Update by the Deputy Chief Scientific Adviser, Defra (Oral)

- 12.1 Deputy CSA, Defra provided an update under three headings: cross government; Defra; strategic monitoring.
- 12.2 Cross-government:
- Cabinet Secretary publication of 100-days message
 - Government CSA – year of Trusted Science
 - Government Science and Engineering profession strategy 2026 published
- 12.3 Defra:
- Direction of travel for science within Defra has shifted
 - CSA consultation for evidence (making science more agile, impactful, trustworthy)
 - Defra year of science
 - Director of Science, Defra recruitment
 - Food resilience
 - Horizon Europe
 - Focus on water
 - Defra R&D fellows
- 12.4 Strategic monitoring:
- How to bring this together
 - Innovation and environmental monitoring

13. Update by the Chief Scientific Adviser, DESNZ

13.1 CSA, DESNZ was unable to join the meeting, and her update has been added to the NERC Council SharePoint site. Her written update covered detail under the following headings:

- Electricity Market Reform
- King's Speech – Energy Independence Bill and Nuclear Regulation Bill
- Ofgem Review & Energy Price Cap
- Carbon Budget 7
- UKRI/Clean Energy & Growth (CEG)
- R&D Mission Accelerator Programme (R&D MAP)
- Cleantech Innovation Challenges (CIC)

14. NERC Assurance Board: final meeting (NERC 26/15)

14.1 Gideon Henderson introduced this item and informed Council that the NERC Assurance Board (NAB) held its final meeting in May 2026.

14.2 Gideon Henderson confirmed that it had been decided to stand down the board given that there was sufficient assurance via other mechanisms, such as the NERC Aviation and Maritime Assurance Panels as well as at UKRI level.

14.3 Gideon Henderson extended his thanks to the members, including the two NERC Non-Executive Directors, and re-confirmed the need to ensure that Council engaged in discussions regarding NERC risks at future meetings, including flagging if any risks do not appear to be included in the register. He added that a discussion on 'assurance' would take place at September Council.

15. Science and Innovation Advisory Committee: agenda and unconfirmed minutes (NERC 26/16)

15.1 Ally Lewis introduced this item to inform Council of key matters discussed at the 2nd meeting of the NERC Science and Innovation Advisory Committee (SIAC).

15.2 Ally Lewis informed Council that the topics for discussion had included: the carbon impact of research; environmental data; technical facilities and apprenticeships.

15.3 Ally Lewis reminded Council that SIAC had been asked to review the future of atmospheric science, adding that an on-line consultation would open soon and there were plans to meet with stakeholders for further discussions over the next two meetings of SIAC. He added that he intended to report back with conclusions to the NERC Executive by the end of 2026.

15.4 Ally Lewis informed Council that SIAC had prepared a collective response to the cross-council Facilities Strategic Advisory Group which advises on STFCs facilities including the Diamond Light Source in relation to facilities which were relevant to NERC remit.

15.5 Ally Lewis informed Council that the next meeting of SIAC would discuss atmospheric science and transcending the frontiers.

15.6 Council asked whether SIAC members had relevant expertise related to atmospheric science or would bring in experts to assist with the review. Ally Lewis responded that there were members with expertise, but the plan was to also involve others in the discussions, including those who worked on atmospheric science and those within Government

departments.

16. Draft agenda for September Council

16.1 Louise Heathwaite introduced this item to agree which items Council might like to take forward, from the list of potential items proposed, for discussion at the next meeting.

16.2 Council agreed that the following items would be timely for discussion in September:

- Centre Agreement Project
- International (Frances Wood to be invited)
- IS8 Programme Directors (to be invited from December 2026 onwards on a rotational basis)
- Dual use across Defence and Security
- Talent and Skills – including the range of opportunities available across UKRI

17. Any Other Business (Oral)

17.1 There was no further business.