



Minutes of the 32nd meeting of NERC Council in UK Research and Innovation

NATURAL ENVIRONMENT RESEARCH COUNCIL

Thirty-second meeting of NERC Council in UK Research and Innovation held at the Marine Station, University of Plymouth on Thursday, 5 March 2026.

[A few agenda items were taken out of sequence during the meeting]

Members present:

Professor Louise Heathwaite (Chair), Cathrine Armour, Professor Richard Bardgett, Professor Hannah Cloke, Professor Peter Cox, Professor Kevin Gaston, Professor Gideon Henderson, Professor Mike Kendall, Michael Lewis, Professor John Pyle

Observers:

Christine Foster, NERC Non-Executive Director, Professor Ally Lewis, Chair, NERC Science and Innovation Committee, Professor Anjali Goswami, CSA, Defra, Professor Emily Shuckburgh, CSA, DESNZ (part)

NERC Directors (Head Office): Kim Bond (NERC Chief Operating Officer), Dr Kate Hamer (NERC Director of Strategy and Performance), 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: Nick Folland, Kim Shillinglaw

Other attendees: Dr Liam Haydon (item 2), Jordan Lips (items 7 and 8), Lisa Bettington (item 9), Des Mhere (item 13)

Secretariat: Helen Page, Jane Kendall

Introductory items

1. Executive Chair's welcome, unconfirmed minutes of the 31st meeting of NERC Council and Action Log (NERC 26/01, NERC 26/02)

- 1.1 Louise Heathwaite welcomed members to the thirty-second 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 Nick Folland and Kim Shillinglaw.
- 1.2 Louise Heathwaite welcomed Professor Ally Lewis to his first meeting since assuming the role of Chair, NERC's Science and Innovation Advisory Committee.
- 1.3 Louise Heathwaite advised Council that this would be the last meeting for Hannah Cloke, Mike Kendall and John Pyle and thanked them for their valuable contributions to NERC.

- 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 congratulated the following who were honoured in the King's New Year Honours:

- **Professor Stephen Belcher**
Met Office Chief Scientist
CBE for services to Climate Science
- **Professor Piers Forster**
Interim Chair, Climate Change Committee and Professor of Physical Climate Change, University of Leeds
CBE for services to Tackling Climate Change
- **Professor Gideon Henderson FRS**
Professor of Earth Sciences, University of Oxford and Senior Independent Member, NERC Council. Lately Chief Scientific Adviser, Defra.
CBE for services to Science
- **Professor Tamsin Mather FRS**
Professor of Earth Sciences, University of Oxford
OBE for services to Volcanology and to the Promotion of Science
- **Professor Frances Wall**
Professor of Applied Mineralogy, Camborne School of Mines, University of Exeter
OBE for services to Geoscience and Sustainable Resource Development
- **Professor John Rees**
Honorary Research Associate and lately Chief Scientist for Multi-Hazards and Resilience, British Geological Survey
MBE for services to Multi-Hazard Science and Disaster Risk Reduction
- **Professor Julia Jones**
Professor in Conservation Science, Bangor University
MBE for services to the Environment
- **Captain Will Whatley**
Master of the RRS *Sir David Attenborough*
Polar Medal

- 1.7 Louise Heathwaite asked members for any amendments and matters arising from the minutes of the previous meeting.

A minor amendment was requested to the minutes prior to the minutes of the thirty-first meeting being confirmed as an accurate record.

It was agreed to add an item to the rolling programme on 'avoided costs'.

ACTION: an item on 'avoided costs' to be added to a future NERC Council meeting

2. **EPSRC/NERC Joint Session: Feedback (Oral) Slides, item 2**

- 2.1 Liam Haydon introduced this item to provide a summary of the discussions which had taken place during the EPSRC/NERC joint session which had been held on the previous day.
- 2.2 Liam Haydon explained that four themes had emerged from the discussions:

- energy security
- Agri- and Aqua-tech
- resource security and efficiency
- data and AI

2.3 Liam Haydon outlined some of the opportunities arising from the discussions for EPSRC and NERC to maximise the value of their joint work and how UKRI might help to facilitate this, prior to inviting Council feedback on the discussions.

2.4 In discussion, the following points were raised:

- future fuels, such as biofuels, as a key area of intersection with EPSRC
- emphasis on improving interaction with industry
- capital engagement and the need to engage with the financial sector for investment
- investments in tidal and wave energy
- better connectivity between discovery science and innovation
- ensuring the environment was considered within programme design at the outset which will increase leverage from both industry and capital investment
- demonstrate how business both relies on the environment and impacts it
- demonstrate economic development opportunities – the business of the environment
- use of new technology to look at resilience within the environment

2.5 Louise Heathwaite commented that it would be important to better articulate the challenges and opportunities for environmental science-driven growth, including appropriate metrics and supporting data and suggested this might be a topic for the Council retreat.

3. FAAM (Oral)

3.1 Louise Heathwaite introduced this item to discuss the decision taken on the FAAM aircraft given the concerns raised by the community. She added that a note would be circulated to Council following the meeting which might be used to support communicating the decision to the community.

3.2 Kim Bond provided some background to the decision, noting that there were a range of commercially sensitive arrangements and liability issues which needed to be considered.

3.3 Kim Bond informed Council that NERC had engaged with the National Centre for Atmospheric Science (NCAS) throughout 2025, setting out the conditions required for continued funding beyond the BAE February 2026 contract extension date. The financial and operational risks remained unresolved by the time that the funding commitments for the financial year 2026/27 were due.

3.4 Rupert Lewis explained that NERC would work with the Science and Innovation Advisory Committee to look at the future direction of atmospheric science.

4. Executive Chair's Update (Oral)

4.1 Louise Heathwaite informed Council that a significant amount of work on the new UKRI allocations model had been taking place since the extraordinary meeting of Council in January. She noted that UKRI had recently published a Sankey diagram providing an overview of how the various types of UKRI funding were allocated within the new model, adding that a NERC version of this diagram was also planned.

4.2 Louise Heathwaite commented that NERC had recently hosted a Community Webinar on the new UKRI Allocation, which had been well attended by the environmental science community.

4.3 Louise Heathwaite informed Council that she had chaired a panel at the IPBES 12 stakeholder day in Manchester and that the 12th Plenary meeting of IPBES had resulted in the Business and Biodiversity assessment being accepted.

- 4.4 Kate Hamer provided an overview of the Clean Energy and Growth IS8 sector, noting that the Clean Energy and Growth Board would have a more focused, prioritised approach than Building a Green Future. She added that a high-level plan would need to be delivered by April 2026.
- 4.5 Louise Heathwaite informed Council that she expected to have her delegation letter, confirming the NERC budget, by the end of March 2026.
- 4.6 Louise Heathwaite informed Council that a decision had been taken to stand down the NERC Assurance Board (NAB). Kim Bond added that this had been agreed as there was some duplication of effort given that there was a UKRI Governance, Risk, Assurance, Review committee in addition to the NERC Aviation and Maritime Assurance Panels. She added that a final meeting of NAB would take place in May with an item on assurance scheduled for September Council to focus on the lessons learnt from NAB.

5. NERC Director updates (Oral) Slides, item 5

- 5.1 Iain Williams, Director, Strategic Partnerships, outlined his primary responsibilities which include: long-term science programmes; facilities, infrastructure and data, technology and space. He added that his current priorities included activity which was both centre/institute as well as UKRI facing.
- 5.2 Jen Jamieson-Ball, Director, Major Programmes and Estates, outlined that both the major programmes and estates and sustainability teams were within her directorate. She added that her current focus areas included: Antarctic Modernisation; Floods and Droughts; Future Marine infrastructure; NERC estates transformation; focus on risk, Health and Safety and assurance across the remit including sharing best practice from the Aviation and Maritime Assurance Panels.
- 5.3 Council asked how the community might put forward ideas for strategic partnerships in the new allocation model. Louise Heathwaite responded that this activity was now embedded within 'bucket' 2 of the allocations model.

Items for discussion

6. Update by the Chief Scientific Adviser, DESNZ (Oral)

- 6.1 Emily Shuckburgh provided an update under the following headings:
 - warm homes plan
 - 6th carbon budget
 - G20 hosting (2027)
 - DESNZ areas of research interest document
 - Clean Energy pillar and challenges on prioritisation
 - R&D Mission Accelerator Programme
 - Clean Tech Innovation challenges
- 6.2 Ally Lewis noted that the warm homes plan referenced several projects funded by NERC.
- 6.3 Gideon Henderson asked whether the 6th carbon budget was legally finalised. Emily Shuckburgh responded that Carbon Budget 6 was legally finalised, with delivery now the focus across all sectors. She added that Carbon Budget 7 was expected to be laid and debated in Parliament by June, and a delivery plan would follow.
- 6.4 Louise Heathwaite asked about the Clean Tech challenges and whether DESNZ was looking for funding to come from partnerships for these. Emily confirmed that, whilst there was no funding within the challenges, the desire was to support them via alignment of UKRI

and relevant research council funding and it would also be important to help in convening and leveraging private sector funding.

[Emily Shuckburgh left the meeting]

7. Talent and Skills (Oral) Slides, item 7

7.1 Louise Heathwaite introduced this item and explained that the budget for Talent and Skills now resided in 'bucket' 4 (enabling and strengthening UK R&D), adding that it would be important to maximise the opportunities and continue to look at the talent pipeline.

7.2 Rupert Lewis provided an overview of the Talent and Skills budget, including market trends and the growth of 'green' employment. He outlined the studentships across UKRI by research council from 2014-2024, noting that NERC investment had increased over this period.

7.3 Rupert Lewis reminded Council that NERC had rebalanced its funding across its doctoral training mechanisms since 2023 with the detail on talent classifications for both Centres for Doctoral Training (CDTs) and Doctoral Training Partnerships (DTPs) illustrated on the slides.

7.4 In discussion, the following points were raised/noted:

- future decisions can't necessarily be made using historic data
- need to improve pathways for PhD students to move into industry and back to academia
- the number of students funded had decreased despite the increase in investment
- whether demand was changing in particular fields
- proposal to look again at whether PhD students might be funded through grants, noting that a high number of PhD students come from outside of the UK
- more insight into who is doing a PhD given the financial commitment (and subsequent student debt)
- consideration of research masters' degrees
- Council members from the private sector noted that PhD students had real added value as employees in terms of workplace maturity and particularly their ease with working in international environments
- it was noted that the balance of UKRI PhD investment across research councils had remained fairly static over ten years, whilst the job market had changed

8. NERC Security and Resilience Risk (NERC 26/03)

8.1 Jordan Lips introduced this item to provide an initial view of NERC's Security and Resilience Risk exposure across five domains: personnel security; physical security; cyber/information security; business continuity management; travel risk management.

8.2 Council asked how this would inform the quarterly risk reviews going forwards. Kim Bond explained that security and resilience were related to a number of objective risks including corporate governance and compliance, infrastructure and organisational resilience.

8.3 Council asked for more information on the Trusted Research and Innovation process outlined in the paper. Jordan Lips informed Council that a Trusted Research workshop had been held with the research centres where the British Geological Survey had demonstrated a process on visitor site access which others might learn from.

9. NERC Council Quarterly Risk Review (NERC 26/04)

9.1 Kim Bond explained that the approach to risk management across UKRI had evolved with the quarterly risk review being updated. As a result the risks were being consolidated and

rationalised.

9.2 Jordan Lips highlighted that the residual risk position remained stable with some strategic decisions required on funding and portfolio balance. The paper provided more detailed risk assessments and outlined some emerging risks. He added that a 'deep dive' on infrastructure was planned for a future Council meeting.

ACTION: item to be added to the rolling programme on Infrastructure Risk

9.3 Kim Bond explained that some of the risks which were outlined in the paper were dependent upon decisions at the UKRI level relating to areas such as funding and partnership work.

9.4 Council asked for more information on the scale of the infrastructure risk. Iain Williams explained that a proportion of NERC's infrastructure was nearing end of life and Kim Bond added that NERC also had an ageing estate. She added that UKRI was developing an estates transformation programme to ensure investment was allocated accordingly.

9.5 Ally Lewis noted the risk related to partnerships and that there would have to be choices around who, for example, universities might choose to partner with in future.

9.6 Council asked whether the environmental sustainability risk on carbon pathway was a shorter long-term issue. Louise Heathwaite confirmed that there were issues in delivering against the targets with the budget available.

10. Infrastructure Fund Proposals (NERC 26/05)

10.1 Iain Williams introduced this item. Lisa Bettington observed this item.

10.2 Iain Williams explained that NERC had submitted two proposals to the Infrastructure Fund Wave 4 in Autumn 2025:

- Environmental Data Research UK (EDR-UK)
- Future Marine Research Infrastructure (FMRI)

10.3 Iain Williams informed Council that the proposals were assessed by the Infrastructure Advisory Committee (IAC) with recommendations provided to ExCo. Following the assessment neither EDR-UK nor FMRI were recommended for funding.

10.4 Iain Williams outlined the next steps which included reviewing the strategic approach to infrastructure planning and pivoting towards autonomous technologies.

10.5 Louise Heathwaite noted the feedback from the IAC and explained that the infrastructure fund was a competitive process, which was also likely to change going forwards.

10.6 Gideon Henderson asked whether a full list of funded projects was available to be shared. Iain Williams explained that not all funded projects had yet been announced and, therefore, a list was not currently available.

11. NERC Council Forward agenda for f/y 2026/27 (NERC 26/06)

11.1 Gideon Henderson introduced this item to review potential items for discussion over the coming year.

11.2 Gideon Henderson outlined some of the topics received in advance: how does the environment feed into the IS8 sectors; avoided costs and losses; discussion on NERC domain and whether all areas are covered adequately (such as climate adaptation); data and future investment; joint meeting with Innovate UK; deep dive on fellowship training.

11.3 Louise Heathwaite asked for topics for the retreat to also be considered.

11.4 Council suggested an additional topic on the changing landscape at UKRI to help inform Council discussions.

ACTION: items from this discussion to be added to the rolling programme

12. Draft agenda for June Council (NERC 26/07)

12.1 This item was not discussed at the meeting and would be agreed outside of the meeting.

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

13.1 Wendy Selby-Brown introduced this item and outlined the position for the current financial year.

13.2 Wendy Selby-Brown informed Council that NERC, British Antarctic Survey (BAS) and British Geological Survey (BGS) were expected to forecast a balanced position by the end of the financial year. She explained that the challenges in making payments to suppliers caused by the introduction of the new Oracle Fusion system were continuing to be managed.

13.3 Wendy Selby-Brown informed Council that NERC was currently subject to an audit over next few months.

13.4 Wendy-Selby Brown added that targets related to Operational Expenditure would be met.

13.5 Louise Heathwaite thanked Wendy Selby-Brown and her team for their help in maintaining a balanced budget.

14. UKRI Update (oral)

14.1 Des Mhere, Deputy Chief People Officer, joined the meeting to provide the UKRI update.

14.2 Des Mhere updated on the following points:

- the appointment of the UKRI Transformation Director: Lyanne Maclean MBE
- People Strategy development
- UKRI values: consultation on refresh
- UKRI hybrid working policy

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

15.1 Anjali Goswami provided an update under the following headings:

- Dame Antonia Romeo appointed as the Cabinet Secretary and Head of the Civil Service
- UK and Japan have announced a major package of science and technology collaborations
- G20 hosting (2027)
- plan to re-start the Meeting of Agricultural Chief Scientists (MACS) of G20 in 2027 and initiate a Meeting of Environmental Chief Scientists (MECS)
- Science 20 (S20)
- Defra R&D fellowship programme

- Defra white paper on water
- Land Use Framework
- Global biodiversity loss, ecosystem collapse and national security report
- Defra/NERC co-working on ecosystem resilience
- Horizon Europe
- Future monitoring system
- Climate Adaptation Research and Innovation Board (CARIB)
- Innovation and Environmental modelling programme

16. Science and Innovation Advisory Committee: agenda and unconfirmed minutes (NERC 26/09)

16.1 Ally Lewis introduced this item to inform Council of key matters discussed at the 1st meeting of the NERC Science and Innovation Advisory Committee (SIAC).

16.2 Ally Lewis informed Council that the 1st meeting had been held in January. Topics for discussion had included future ways of working for SIAC which had led to assigning members to IS8 sectors and agreeing to provide NERC with insight from universities. He added that consideration of the future membership of SIAC was also underway.

16.3 Council asked for some information on the work SIAC had been tasked with related to the future of atmospheric science. Ally Lewis advised that this required some planning and that he would report back at a future meeting.

17. Any Other Business (Oral)

17.1 Louise Heathwaite informed Council that UKRI was currently advertising for a Programme Director, Clean Energy and Growth and asked members to promote this opportunity.

17.2 Louise Heathwaite added that Kate Hamer would be leaving NERC in May to assume the role of UKRI Director, Strategy, Insights and Sponsorship, and thanked her for her excellent contribution to NERC.

17.3 Council asked for more information on the cancellation of the subscription to the International Institute for Applied Systems Analysis (IIASA). Rupert Lewis responded that a review of all international partnerships had taken place which had included consultation with DESNZ, Defra and Government Office for Science and the Royal Society.