



Natural
Environment
Research Council

Minutes of the 15th meeting of NERC Council in UK Research and Innovation (redacted)

NATURAL ENVIRONMENT RESEARCH COUNCIL

Fifteenth meeting of NERC Council in UK Research and Innovation held at the National Centre for Earth Observation, Leicester, on Thursday, 9 December 2021.

Members present:

Professor Sir Duncan Wingham (Executive Chair) (via Zoom), Nick Folland (Senior Independent Member and Acting Chair), Professor Hannah Cloke, Dr Matthew Harwood, Dr Rebecca Heaton, Professor Sir Stephen Holgate (via Zoom), Professor Karin Lochte (via Zoom), Michael Lewis, Clare Matterson, Gordon McGregor (via Zoom), Professor John Pyle, Professor Gideon Henderson, CSA, Defra (part), Professor Graham Underwood, Chair, Science Committee (via Zoom)

NERC/UKRI Directors (Head Office): Nigel Bird (Director, Major Projects), Victoria McMyn (Chief Operating Officer), Alison Robinson (Deputy Executive Chair), Professor Susan Waldron (Director, Research and Skills), Dr Iain Williams (Director, Strategic Partnerships), Sue Donaldson (Chief People Officer, UKRI) (via Zoom)

Apologies: Judith Batchelar

Other attendees: Sally Reid for item 7, Liam Haydon for item 8, Jen Jennings and Sarah Turner for Item 6, Michelle Wickenden for item 9

Secretariat: Helen Page, Michelle Wickenden

Introductory items

1. Executive Chair's welcome and introductions (Oral)

- 1.1 Nick Folland chaired the meeting and welcomed members to the fifteenth meeting of NERC Council. Duncan Wingham joined via Zoom.
- 1.2 Nick Folland asked members for any amendments and matters arising from the minutes of the previous meeting. Helen Page advised Council that a minor edit had been agreed to Item 9 from the September meeting (Leadership of the UKRI Environmental Sustainability Strategy) following a suggestion by Hannah Cloke. She offered to share the revised wording with members before publication if they wished to see it. No further amendments were made, and the minutes of the fourteenth meeting were confirmed as a good record.
- 1.3 Nick Folland advised that all of the actions listed on the Decisions and Actions paper were completed or on the forward agenda.

2. UKRI update (Oral) *Slides, item 2*

2.1 Sue Donaldson explained that her update would focus on the Efficiency Plan, the UKRI Operating Model and the Independent Review led by Sir David Grant.

i. Efficiency Plan

Sue Donaldson advised Council that UKRI had been asked to produce an efficiency plan in the context of the Spending Review bid. She added that some of the efficiencies identified in the plan included the major change programmes, such as Simpler Better Funding (SBF) and Services for HR, Accounting, Reporting and Procurement (SHARP), alongside changes to the way in which UKRI was organised (the UKRI Operating Model). The plan included a commitment to significantly reduce Operating Expenditure (OpEx) over a three-year period. Sue Donaldson explained that Tim Bianek, the UKRI Chief Operating Officer, was the Senior Responsible Owner (SRO) for the efficiency plan and that he was working closely with the Chief Operating Officers in the research councils.

ii. UKRI Operating Model

Sue Donaldson explained that the UKRI Operating Model would be key to delivering the new UKRI strategy and that a series of workshops had been held to agree a set of design principles. The six themes included: simplification of both the organisation and the processes within the corporate centre of UKRI; data and insight; optimising our skills and working more collaboratively; optimising outcomes from innovation; effectiveness of decision making and financial flexibility. She added that the timeline was ambitious with outputs expected early in 2022.

iii. Independent Review

Sue Donaldson advised Council that BEIS had commissioned an independent review of UKRI, led by Sir David Grant, which would report in Summer 2022. The review would evaluate how effective, efficient and accountable UKRI was as an organisation and would include a review of its governance. Sue Donaldson added that the independent review was likely to overlap with the work UKRI was already undertaking in formulating its strategy, revising its operating model and producing an efficiency plan. She added that it was important to ensure this was understood so that UKRI was seen to be proactively leading the agenda rather than reacting to external pressure to change.

2.2 Council asked whether the independent review would have any implications for NERC. Sue Donaldson responded that the focus of the review appeared to be on whether UKRI was realising the benefits of bringing together its nine component organisations and whether UKRI was providing effective and efficient central support services. She added that the relationship between the UKRI Board and the Councils was also likely to be considered as part of the review. Duncan Wingham commented that the efficiency agenda was also a key component, with the efficacy of UKRI being evaluated with regard to the anticipated 'value add' that was a key part of its establishment.

2.3 Council commented that any efficiency review should ensure that the administrative burden, such as work currently carried out in the corporate centre, was reduced and not merely transferred back to the research councils. Council also expressed some concern about any future reduction in NERC headcount due to OpEx budget reductions. Duncan Wingham commented that the reduction in OpEx budget, whilst maintaining the capability to deliver on NERC activities, would be challenging. Sue Donaldson added that some focus needed to be on streamlining and reducing duplication as well as improving our systems and processes.

2.4 Council asked what mechanisms were in place for UKRI to demonstrate how it added value. Sue Donaldson responded that the emerging UKRI strategy was helpful in

demonstrating the increasingly collaborative work across UKRI.

3. Update from CSA, Defra (Oral)

3.1 Gideon Henderson explained that his update would focus on six areas:

i. Spending Review

Gideon Henderson commented that the increase to the Research and Development (R&D) budget to £20 billion by the end of the Spending Review period was a positive outcome. He added that, in addition to UKRI, the Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC), Defra and the Department for Transport (DfT) had received increases in budget. He informed Council that Defra had plans to fund a wide range of activities including: the Natural Capital and Ecosystem Assessment; better integration of data across Defra and government and Net Zero. He added that discussions had taken place between UKRI, BBSRC and NERC on how to ensure better integration between Defra and the research councils. Gideon Henderson informed Council that Defra had received a commitment from HM Treasury to support the Copernicus programme and awaited an outcome on the future of association.

ii. COP26

Gideon Henderson informed Council that there had been positive outcomes from COP26 particularly on forests, methane and coal with the theme of nature more prominent than at previous COPs. He added that Alison Robinson had been instrumental in increasing the profile of science and innovation and thanked her for her leadership in this area.

iii. Net Zero

Gideon Henderson highlighted that the Government had now published its Net Zero Strategy which outlined how it intended to meet its ambitions in this area. He added that the Government had also published a Net Zero Research and Innovation Framework which outlined some of the detail of the research needed. Gideon Henderson confirmed that Net Zero remained a key government priority with the Net Zero Innovation Board, chaired by Sir Patrick Vallance and attended by Duncan Wingham, Chief Scientific Advisors and representatives from industry focusing on how to deliver the strategy.

iv. Environment Bill

Gideon Henderson informed Council that the Environment Bill was now the Environment Act 2021 and that targets on air and water quality, biodiversity and resources and waste were currently being finalised before initiating a consultation process.

v. Epidemics

Gideon Henderson had recently attended a meeting of SAGE which had discussed the new COVID variant, Omicron, and avian influenza both of which were of concern.

vi. Research, development and innovation review

Gideon Henderson advised Council that a review of the diversity of institutes in the R&D landscape in the UK had been commissioned and was being led by Sir Paul Nurse. He added that this review was expected to include research council institutes (both current and former).

3.2 Council welcomed the publication of the Net Zero Strategy and the lead the UK was taking in producing this and asked whether there was more to be done, for example in international trade of carbon credits. Gideon Henderson responded that there was interest in Government, and a requirement on Defra within the Spending Review settlement, to increase green finance with carbon credits considered as one aspect of this.

3.3 Council asked how Defra planned to manage the significant increase in budget over the Spending Review period and queried whether any of the topics highlighted in this update had any implications for the devolved administrations. Gideon Henderson responded that

Defra were in the process of business planning and acknowledged that there were challenges with such a steep increase, but that he was confident that the Public Sector Research Establishments (PSRE's) and the world class environmental science landscape in the UK would enable the budget to be spent effectively. He added that he met on a regular basis with his counterparts in the devolved nations and highlighted one area of potential regulatory divergence on gene editing following a decision to relax the rules on gene editing for crops and livestock in England.

4. Executive Chair's update (Oral)

4.1 Duncan Wingham gave an oral update on some of the key activities since the previous Council meeting.

i. UKRI Board/Council Conference

Duncan Wingham commented that the recent UKRI Board/Council conference had raised the issue of whether the Council meetings should be independently chaired and, whilst NERC was currently operating in line with current UKRI policy, it was possible that the independent review of UKRI might recommend that Councils were independently chaired in future.

ii. Reviews

Duncan Wingham informed Council that, in addition to the two reviews already mentioned, a third review was also underway, led by Professor Adam Tickle, on research bureaucracy. He explained that the purpose of the review was to reduce paperwork for both grant applicants and reviewers, and that an interim report would be published in January 2022. He added that all three reviews were taking place in parallel and would help to determine whether the UK had the right portfolio of delivery organisations and to identify potential organisational change which might result in changes to the way in which funding was tensioned.

iii. Simpler and Better Funding

Duncan Wingham reminded Council that he was the SRO for this programme and that the first NERC call was due to move to the new system with a gradual transfer of all funding opportunities over the next two years. He added that the new system would run in parallel with the old system, JeS, to mitigate any risks associated with moving to a new system. The programme would be expected to deliver a simplified funding system whilst also seeking to reduce bureaucracy and the amount of paperwork involved for both applicants and reviewers.

Duncan Wingham commented that a key challenge would be on how we might deliver any increase in funding whilst reducing the cost of delivery. He highlighted that the most significant costs related to the process related to reviewing grant applications and that focusing on simplifying the review process would be key whilst retaining the confidence of the community in the decision-making process.

iv. Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) Community Roundtables

Duncan Wingham informed Council that NERC had held a series of community roundtables focused on EDI which had highlighted some negative experiences, including in working with the research councils. He added that it was clear that the community would welcome schemes which would be designed to increase the representation of ethnic minority groups particularly those at an early stage in their careers and he intended to discuss this at UKRI level to agree a common approach across the organisation. Duncan Wingham added that a review of international schemes was underway to see whether such schemes were successful in retaining people in the subject areas and emphasised the role of mentoring and the importance of role models.

Duncan Wingham commented that positive feedback had been received regarding the EDI Enrichment call which NERC had launched and asked Susan Waldron to provide

some detail. Susan Waldron explained that the 'Making Environmental Science Equal, Diverse and Inclusive' call would invest £1.5 million to support 19 research consortia and that there had been a lot of community interest with 45 applications. She added that investment across all stages of the environmental sciences was considered in addition to research quality and that those awarded had been asked to report back on their research outcomes at an event next Autumn.

Duncan Wingham added that there would be a further discussion on the NERC EDI plan at the March 2022 Council meeting.

v. Antarctica

Duncan Wingham informed Council that the RRS *Sir David Attenborough* had arrived in the Falklands on 9 December 2021. He asked Nigel Bird to provide an update on activities in the Antarctic. Nigel Bird advised Council that NERC was operating at a higher level of operational risk than was usual due to COVID, one example of this was the inability to use the South American gateway to get to and from the Antarctic. As a consequence of this, the only access was via the Falklands which was constraining operations due to the limited number of people who could be transported at one time due to restricted options to quarantine staff in the Falklands. Other operational issues were due to limited activity in the Antarctic since the start of the pandemic, which affected the location of fuel, a decrease in routine maintenance and the decision to postpone the construction of the new building at Rothera with its associated cost implications.

Nigel Bird added that the replacement aircraft had now been selected and the modifications to the runway agreed and that Government approval was currently awaited to proceed with the purchase by Spring 2022.

vi. COP26

Duncan Wingham reminded members that Alison Robinson was the SRO for the Science and Innovation Day and invited her to comment. Alison Robinson commented that the UK presidency had provided an opportunity to draw on, and showcase, the breadth and depth of research and innovation in the UK. She informed Council that there was an intention for the Science and Innovation day to become a more permanent feature of future COPs, noting that some countries might need support with this in future.

Alison Robinson added that the existence of UKRI had been an advantage in delivering a successful COP and that the research councils had worked well together to deliver a successful programme.

Council congratulated Alison Robinson on the success of the Science and Innovation Day and highlighted the announcement at COP by the Department for Education on the National Education Nature Park and the Climate Leaders Award. Council asked whether NERC might have a role to play and it was suggested that opportunities for early engagement be explored outside of the meeting. Council highlighted that there might be further opportunities, whilst the UK retained its presidency, and whether information gathered through COP would be coordinated and used to explore future opportunities for international partnerships. Alison Robinson informed Council that Professor Christopher Smith, Executive Chair, AHRC, and the UKRI international team would be building on discussions initiated at COP. She added that the Net Zero Innovation Board would be considering how to continue to support the UK presidency at a structural level.

Council asked whether there might be an opportunity to join the environmental health and human health agendas for public benefit. Alison Robinson confirmed that health was included at the Science and Innovation Day with discussions about the co-benefits of health and climate with some announcements made which she agreed to share offline.

Finally, Duncan Wingham explained to Council that Sir Patrick Vallance had been very complimentary of the role Alison Robinson had played in ensuring science was

represented at COP and that UKRI and NERC had made a significant contribution to the success of the conference.

Items for discussion

5. Spending Review (Oral) Slide, item 5

- 5.1 Duncan Wingham introduced this item and presented a slide to outline the potential shape of the BEIS and UKRI settlement and explained that some of the figures were confirmed in the Spending Review (marked with high confidence) whilst some were yet to be confirmed.
- 5.2 Duncan Wingham highlighted the increase in the core budget for Innovate UK which would increase from £0.6 billion in 2021/22 to £1.1 billion by 2024/25 and explained that this budget was ringfenced.
- 5.3 Council commented that the estimated increase in the UKRI budget was relatively smaller than the science budget as a whole. Duncan Wingham responded that the overall settlement signalled a view by Government that other government departments were an important part of science activity in the UK and the Spending Review settlement partly sought to re-build budgets which had been cut during times of austerity. He added that working closely with other government departments to identify opportunities to work together was increasingly important and that UKRI was developing themes, such as Net Zero plus, which included working with other government departments to explore opportunities to work together on themes such as air quality, environment and mental health.

6. Strategic Research Investment to achieve NERC Delivery Plan Ambitions (NERC 21/38) Slides, item 6

- 6.1 Susan Waldron introduced this item and explained that, due to significant headroom in the strategic research investment funding stream due to budgetary uncertainty and delays to research calls due to the pandemic, these proposals would be launched in 2022/23 to enable the headroom to be managed effectively. Jen Jennings and Sarah Turner observed this item.
- 6.2 Susan Waldron explained that Council were being asked to approve the three programme areas as important and appropriate to invest in and, although these ideas had not yet been discussed at Science Committee, Science Committee would look in detail at the science planned at their meeting in February 2022 to shape the announcement of opportunity prior to the call being launched.
- 6.3 Susan Waldron outlined the three proposed strategic research programmes:
 - i. Predicting the future of the global ocean carbon sink.
 - ii. Understanding the deterioration in quality of UK freshwaters.
 - iii. Biodiversity positive future.
- 6.4 Council was supportive of all three proposed research programmes and discussion then focused on offering feedback on how value may be added to the programmes and on clarifying the scope of the proposed investment and how the research would be implemented. Susan Waldron clarified that the global ocean sink programme would focus on the open ocean, that business communities had been involved in the initial stages of formulating the Biodiversity Positive Future programme and that implementation varied with programmes, for example the freshwater quality programme proposed multiple research groups working in parallel in all aspects of the problem.
- 6.5 Duncan Wingham commented that it was important to continue to recognise the role of NERC in diagnosing the impact on the environment and, in response to a question about

other programmes that may come forward, such as carbon capture and storage, noted that UKRI was an important source of funding for providing solutions to meet the net zero ambitions.

- 6.6 In summary, Nick Folland confirmed that Council was in agreement that these were appropriate investments to support the strategic ambitions and that the scope of the proposals was going to be developed further as the process continued.

Decision: Council approved the Strategic Research programmes areas as important and appropriate to invest in anticipating that Science Committee would discuss further in February

7. Consideration of the full proposals for Round 2 of NERC National Capability Multi-Centre Science (NERC 21/39)

- 7.1 Iain Williams presented this item and reminded Council that they had reviewed the outline proposals at their meeting in June 2021 and agreed to make an excellence award to the highest quality proposals. Sally Reid observed this item.

- 7.2 John Pyle declared a conflict of interest due to his affiliation with the National Centre for Atmospheric Science (NCAS). He remained for the discussion but did not comment specifically on the proposals.

- 7.3 Graham Underwood explained that, following peer review, Science Committee had thoroughly reviewed the proposals at their meeting in October and interviewed the Principal Investigators as part of the process. The outcomes of the review were that Science Committee recommended:

- i. BIOPOLE and TerraFIRMA proposals were supported at the proposed levels of funding.
- ii. CANARI and Green_Ag were recommended for excellence adjustments, at 20-30% and 10-20% of the total project cost, respectively.
- iii. CHAMFER and MOET be asked to revise and resubmit their Cases for Support based on Science Committee feedback for further discussion in February 2022.

- 7.4 Council expressed some concern about the lack of equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) noted in the leadership of the proposed programmes. Graham Underwood commented that Science Committee would recommend that this was made more explicit in future calls to ensure EDI considerations were embedded in future.

- 7.5 Council supported the recommendations made by Science Committee and noted that it had been a thorough process. An offer to help in improving the CHAMFER and MOET proposals was received from Defra and Council highlighted that the MOET proposal was important for industry and should be offered support to improve.

- 7.6 Council asked whether the impact of science on society was an important criteria in the final decision-making process and whether Science Committee had found it difficult to assess the proposals. Graham Underwood confirmed that the criteria for assessing the proposals was clear and that external reviews had augmented the expertise on Science Committee. He confirmed that scientific excellence had been the primary consideration along with strategic context and fit to scheme. Iain Williams added that the peer review process had been more variable and it would be important to ensure peer reviewers were fully briefed on the programme to ensure better quality reviews.

- 7.7 In summary, Nick Folland commented that there was strong endorsement for the recommendations from Science Committee and that Council had offered support in refining the two proposals which would be asked to resubmit.

Decision: Council endorsed the Science Committee recommendations

8. NERC Delivery Plan Refresh (NERC 21/40) Slides, item 8

- 8.1 Alison Robinson introduced this item and presented slides. Liam Haydon observed this item.
- 8.2 Alison Robinson commented that the NERC Strategic Delivery Plan would be linked to the UKRI Strategy which was based around five objectives, or pillars, and that this format would provide a framework for the Council Delivery Plans. She added that it would be important to produce a strategy for NERC which both addressed the shared objectives across UKRI and the NERC-specific objectives.
- 8.3 Alison Robinson explained that the two-page summary 'blueprint' of the NERC Delivery Plan would be finalised for discussion by the UKRI Board in January 2022. She added that a full draft of the NERC Delivery Plan would be circulated to Council for comment by correspondence before engaging with a range of stakeholders to seek wider views prior to reviewing a near-final draft of the Delivery Plan at the March 2022 NERC Council meeting.
- 8.4 Alison Robinson presented a slide which mapped some of the existing NERC Delivery Plan themes to the UKRI strategic objectives and invited Council to comment on whether the mapping was appropriate and whether there were any further areas to consider.
- 8.5 Council supported the mapping which had taken place and commented that the draft version of the UKRI Strategy, particularly in the first three sections, was very high level although more detail, particularly on pan-UKRI activity, was included in sections four and five.
- 8.6 In discussion of the summary of the NERC Delivery Plan, Council members:
 - i. Welcomed the inclusion of talent and skills and the use of case studies to make real NERC science. Council asked for more emphasis on areas including resources and waste, measurement and metrics, the importance of partnership working including across UKRI and across disciplines.
 - ii. Noted the strategy would cover a three-year period, and the need to ensure it was robust to future events as well as immediate context.
- 8.7 In summary, Nick Folland commented that there was strong support from Council for the proposed methodology, and an acknowledgement that the NERC Strategic Delivery Plan served a dual purpose in facing inwards to UKRI and clearly articulating NERC priorities and included some engaging case studies. Alison Robinson added that she would welcome a critical appraisal by Council of the full draft in January so that there was confidence in presenting this to stakeholders.

Decision: Council agreed the proposed approach to refreshing the NERC Delivery Plan

Action: Council to critically appraise the full draft of the Delivery Plan via correspondence in January 2022

9. Proposal to establish a Future Leaders Advisory Council (NERC 21/41)

- 9.1 Alison Robinson reminded Council that they had previously suggested that NERC might establish a 'Shadow' Council to broaden the perspectives in NERC decision making. She added that she now proposed to rename it the Future Leaders Council. Michelle Wickenden observed this item.
- 9.2 Alison Robinson explained that the primary focus of the Future Leaders Council would be

twofold: to seek a broader range of views to inform Council decision making and to provide developmental opportunities to those appointed. She added that, by providing an opportunity to increase understanding of how governance operates in an organisation such as NERC, this might result in Future Leaders Council members progressing to roles such as Council member and Non-Executive Director in the future. Alison Robinson commented that it would be important for the Terms of Reference (ToR) to be clear so that the role was well articulated to ensure a broad and diverse group of people applied for the roles and we did not over, or under, promise on their role within NERC governance.

- 9.3 Alison Robinson advised Council that, following their approval, the intention was to establish the Future Leaders Council by September 2022 through a robust recruitment and induction process. She added that it was being proposed that the Future Leaders Council would review the same papers as Council, although in advance, and that the Chair would attend Council in a similar way to the Chair of Science Committee. It was also intended that a member of NERC Council would sit on the Future Leaders Council to provide interconnectivity and offer a mentoring role.
- 9.4 Council was supportive, in principle, of the idea set out in the paper. In discussion, the following points were raised:
- i. The importance of ensuring members of the Future Leaders Council were respected and valued through a clearly articulated role for the group.
 - ii. The importance of a targeted, focused and transparent recruitment campaign.
 - iii. The benefit of identifying specific topics or functions within the ToR that the Future Leaders Council would 'own' and make a distinct contribution to NERC.
 - iv. A suggestion that, after the first year of operation, it would be helpful to review and change tack if needed, to ensure successful operation.
- 9.5 Alison Robinson welcomed the comments and agreed with Council's concern to be as clear as possible about the role of the Future Leaders Council, noting that the experience of others demonstrated that having the role and function sharply defined would ensure its successful operation. In commenting on the potential for opposing views, Alison Robinson acknowledged that there was a risk that the Future Leaders Council might feel disempowered if Council did not take on board their advice but felt confident that both groups would be prepared to listen to, and respect, each other's views.
- 9.6 Alison Robinson confirmed that the balance of membership would be reflective of Council with a mix of academic and business backgrounds, but at an earlier career stage, and emphasised the importance of recruiting a strong Chair for the Future Leaders Council. She agreed that there would be a review of the effectiveness following the first year of operation and that this was included in the ToR.
- 9.7 In summary, Nick Folland thanked NERC for the work done so far in answering the request of Council to establish this body. He commented that there was strong support from Council for the proposal which required some amendment to strengthen its developmental purpose. He acknowledged that the Future Leaders Council should connect NERC to a different set of voices within the community. It will be important to ensure there are distinct roles for the Future Leaders Council and NERC Council to clearly set expectations. Finally, he emphasised the benefit for members of reading and assimilating large sets of papers whilst acknowledging there would also be some benefit in identifying specific issues for them to look at in more detail. Nick Folland invited the Executive to return to Council if needed to ensure the ToR would support the successful operation of the new Future Leaders Council.

Action: Council agreed to the proposal to establish a Future Leaders Council subject to revised Terms of Reference

10. NERC financial outturn 2021/22 and draft budget 2022/23 (NERC 21/42)

- 10.1 Victoria McMyn introduced this item and advised Council that UKRI had started the financial year with a planned over commitment based on an expectation that underspend would emerge through the year. Following some activity to reduce the over commitment and, acknowledging emerging activities, UKRI were now increasingly confident that the budget would be met by the end of the financial year.
- 10.2 Council asked whether NERC had any concerns about the rising inflation rates and Victoria explained that a risk had been added to the risk register as there were concerns, particularly around price volatility related to the British Antarctic Survey and ship operations. She added that the budgets contained a contingency within them for this reason and that NERC were confident they might manage this in the budget for 2021/22 and would take this into account when planning the budgets for 2022/23. Additionally, supply chain volatility was causing delayed expenditure and cost inflation in some of the supplies especially in the digital space.
- 10.3 Council asked whether there was any risk to Antarctic funding, particularly in light of the delays in building the new building. Nigel Bird commented that the increase to employer's National Insurance contributions was a concern and this would need further discussion at UKRI level. He added that the volatility in prices and availability of materials in the construction sector were also a concern and would affect all large capital purchases.

11. Review of the Top Risks at December 2021 (NERC 21/43)

- 11.1 Victoria McMyn introduced this item and advised Council that NERC had its own risk manager following a period when the role was centralised. She explained that one of the benefits of this was that the NERC risks had received a thorough review in terms of appropriateness and suitable mitigating actions. The risk register had been updated in line with the changing global context with updates made predominantly to operational risks with a new risk added related to Horizon Europe.
- 11.2 Council asked whether there was any impact on Higher Education Institutes following a reduction in foreign student revenue and whether this might constitute a risk. Duncan Wingham commented that the risk had been largely mitigated by a move to online teaching due to the pandemic. He acknowledged, however, that there was some risk related to the attractiveness of the UK for international researchers.

12. Agenda and unconfirmed minutes of Science Committee (NERC 21/44)

- 12.1 Graham Underwood introduced this item to update Council on the tenth meeting of Science Committee which had been held in October 2021 and advised that they had held their first physical meeting since the start of the pandemic.
- 12.2 Graham Underwood commented that Science Committee had supported the changes to the Pushing the Frontiers call agreed by Council in September and provided advice on how the changes were communicated.
- 12.3 Graham Underwood informed Council that Science Committee had reviewed the Highlight Topics at their last meeting and he reassured Council that the application numbers had returned to pre-pandemic levels in this round. He added that the paper contained the ten highlight topics selected for funding which had been ranked in priority order.
- 12.4 Graham Underwood advised Council that an additional meeting of Science Committee had taken place in November to review mid-term Single Centre Science and the mid-term National Public Good programmes. He added that a new process for reviewing these had been used which had proved to be a successful model for future reviews.
- 12.5 Graham Underwood informed Council that interviews had recently been held for new members of Science Committee. He advised that two new members had been identified

and accepted their offers and were currently awaiting security clearance. There had been an effort to broaden the pool of applicants by exploring alternative advertising routes and improving the advertisement text which had resulted in a good gender balance of applicants although, unfortunately, had not increased applications from ethnic minority groups or those from more diverse backgrounds. Graham Underwood thanked Clare Matterson who had represented NERC Council on the interview panel.

13. Rolling Programme (NERC 21/45)

13.1 Nick Folland introduced this item and asked members for any comments on items for discussion at future meetings. He confirmed that the intention was to have an EDI discussion at the March 2022 Council meeting and to comment on the NERC Strategic Delivery Plan by correspondence prior to a follow up discussion in March 2022.

13.2 Council asked whether the infrastructure discussion planned for June 2022 might include alignment with the budget cycle and capital which may be available for environmental infrastructure.

13.3 Duncan Wingham reminded members that the next meeting would include the Council retreat where issues of importance for the coming year were discussed and asked members if there were any broad themes they might like to suggest.

13.4 Council suggested that one theme might be around 'people', including training, career progression routes, support for technical professions and how NERC can support people within the science system

14. Any Other Business (Oral)

14.1 Hannah Cloke advised Council that the European Centre for Medium Range Weather Forecasts (ECMWF) would be remaining in the UK and moving to the University of Reading. Duncan Wingham commented that this was good news for both the university and the UK.

14.2 Nick Folland thanked Council for an engaging meeting. He asked for thanks, on behalf of Council, to be extended to the National Centre for Earth Observation for hosting the meeting and for organising an excellent tour and showcase event.

14.3 The meeting was closed.