



Natural  
Environment  
Research Council

## Minutes of the 27<sup>th</sup> meeting of NERC Council in UK Research and Innovation

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### NATURAL ENVIRONMENT RESEARCH COUNCIL

Twenty-seventh meeting of NERC Council in UK Research and Innovation held at the Cranfield Management Development Centre, on Thursday, 5 December 2024.

#### Members present:

Cathrine Armour, Professor Hannah Cloke, Professor Kevin Gaston, Professor Sir Stephen Holgate (via Teams), Professor Mike Kendall, Michael Lewis, Professor Peter Liss, Clare Matterson, Gordon McGregor, Rashik Parmar (Chair), Professor John Pyle

#### Observers:

Christine Foster, NERC Non-Executive Director (via Teams), Professor David Hannah, Chair, Science Committee, Professor Gideon Henderson, CSA, Defra, Charlie McNichol-Fardon, Chair, Future Leaders Council

**NERC/UKRI Directors (Head Office):** Dr Kate Hamer (Interim Director of Strategy and Analysis), Jen Jamieson-Ball (Deputy Director, Major Programmes and Infrastructure), Wendy Selby-Brown (NERC Finance Business Partner) (via Teams), Michaela Simpson (Interim Director People, Culture and Operations), Dr Tracy Shimmield (Interim Director Research and Skills) (via Teams), Dr Iain Williams (Director, Strategic Partnerships)

**Apologies:** Professor Louise Heathwaite

**Other attendees:** Professor Dame Ottoline Leyser (Item 2, via Teams); Professor Paul Monks (Item 3), Dr Liam Haydon, (Items 6-7, via Teams), Sarah Turner (Item 8, via Teams), Jonathan Dawes (Item 9, via Teams), Leigh Storey (Item 10, via Teams), Liesbeth Renders (Item 11, via Teams)

**Secretariat:** Helen Page, Gemma Davies

#### Introductory items

#### 1. Executive Chair's welcome, unconfirmed minutes of the 26<sup>th</sup> meeting of NERC Council and Decisions and Actions (Oral)

- 1.1 Rashik, Parmar chaired the meeting and welcomed members to the twenty-seventh meeting of NERC Council and noted that apologies had been received for the meeting from Louise Heathwaite.
- 1.2 Rashik Parmar welcomed Jen Jamieson-Ball to her first NERC Council meeting since assuming the role of Deputy Director, Major Programmes and Infrastructure.
- 1.3 Rashik Parmar reminded members to ensure their declared interests were kept updated, adding that updates might be sent to Helen Page at any point for adding to the portal.
- 1.4 Rashik Parmar asked if there were any vested interests in any of the items being discussed

today. None were declared.

- 1.5 Rashik Parmar congratulated Peter Liss, on behalf of Council, on his Lifetime Achievement Award, recently awarded by the Surface Ocean – Lower Atmosphere Study Project (SOLAS).
- 1.6 Rashik Parmar asked members for any amendments and matters arising from the minutes of the previous meeting. No amendments were made, and the minutes of the twenty-sixth meeting were confirmed as an accurate record.

### **Items for discussion**

## **2. Professor Dame Ottoline Leyser (Oral)**

- 2.1 Rashik Parmar welcomed Ottoline Leyser, UKRI CEO to NERC Council to provide an update on recent UKRI activity.
- 2.2 Ottoline Leyser informed Council that UKRI had strong relationships across all Government departments which would be important in supporting the collaborative working which would be needed to deliver on the Government's five key missions as set out in the manifesto. She added that UKRI had a key role to play in maximising the benefit of the increased Research and Development (R&D) budget across the public sector, particularly going into the second phase of the Spending Review (SR).

Ottoline Leyser noted that there continued to be financial tension in the R&D system and outlined that, for UKRI, this would have an impact particularly for those research councils with institutes and centres. She informed Council that Anne Ferguson-Smith, Executive Chair, BBSRC, was leading a review looking at the institute portfolio across UKRI to better understand the key national capabilities being delivered and how they might be supported in a way that provided increased budget flexibility.

Ottoline Leyser commented that, whilst the Government was supportive of protecting curiosity-driven research, there was an ambition to ensure clear benefit from the research in terms of growing the economy or improving public services. She added that this would be the framing for the Spending Review Phase 2 and that NERC would input via those areas which it led on for UKRI, such as Building a Green Future and the Clean Energy Mission.

- 2.3 Ottoline Leyser explained that there had been a delay to the implementation of the Services for HR, Accounting, Reporting and Procurement (SHARP) programme which would be enabled by the upgraded Oracle Fusion software and that this was now due to be implemented in the new financial year. She added that the new funding service was progressing well and thanked the UKRI Chief Information Officer for her leadership and key role in progressing these projects.
- 2.4 Council asked how UKRI might continue to support the champion activity as part of the Strategic Priority Fund (SPF), given that the large research consortia would continue beyond the funding. Ottoline Leyser commented that the successor to SPF was the UKRI themes which included investment from a wide range of other funders, adding that it would be important for those involved in any SPF activity to agree a shared outcome when the investment came to an end. Gideon Henderson commented that learning captured from the SPF should feed into government thinking.
- 2.5 Council asked whether there was any concern about the Government missions directing research rather than allowing flexibility. Ottoline Leyser responded that Lord Vallance, the Science Minister, had a strong understanding of Research and Innovation (R&I) and was protective of curiosity-driven research and the importance of this pulling through to

economic growth and citizen benefit. She added that UKRI was uniquely placed as a critical node in the R&I system with a role to support the research and innovation base and the wider government department investments, which were policy driven.

- 2.6 Council asked how UKRI might help in ensuring all sectors of society were included in R&D, particularly addressing the diversity and inclusion issue of underperforming sectors. Ottoline Leyser acknowledged that there was a challenge with low socio-economic groups, adding that there was limited data on this currently within UKRI. She commented that it would be important to increase engagement in education and training and support career path diversity through recruiting into academia from a wider pool, for instance, those who came from an industry or policy background. Ottoline Leyser acknowledged that many UKRI institutes and centres had strong apprenticeship programmes which also helped to widen the demographic.
- 2.7 Council asked whether, given the rise in science becoming more globally politicised, UKRI should be considering doing things differently in relation to funding, engagement and partnerships with other countries. Ottoline Leyser responded that it would be important to continue to promote the narrative that R&I was a shared endeavour and that working collaboratively and focusing on similarities, rather than differences, would be key.
- 2.8 Gideon Henderson asked whether there was role for UKRI in ensuring Government departments were better joined up when working internationally including on prioritisation. Ottoline Leyser acknowledged that strong international collaboration was important and commented that UKRI had a cross-UKRI international team which led on this activity, noting that there were some challenges in joining up activity. She suggested that the Chief Scientific Advisors might link up with Frances Wood, UKRI International Director, who was the lead director within UKRI.

### **3. Professor Paul Monks (Oral), Slides, Item 3**

- 3.1 Professor Paul Monks, Chief Scientific Adviser, Department for Energy Security and Net Zero presented to Council on the R&I required to support the Government Clean Energy Superpower Mission.
- 3.2 Paul Monks explained that the Clean Energy Superpower Mission had two main areas of focus both linked to the economic growth mission:
  - clean power by 2030
  - accelerating to Net Zero
- 3.3 Council commented that it would be important to engage individuals in making 'green choices' such as installing heat pumps and improving home insulation and asked how this might be incentivised to increase the uptake. Paul Monks acknowledged that social incentives were important and that this would need to be scaled up to meet the challenge.
- 3.4 Council commented that non-traditional, innovative research would be needed in achieving the ambitions.
- 3.5 Council asked about governance of the mission, for example, who decides on the level of Greenhouse Gases. Paul Monks advised that this was governed by the Paris Agreement, advising that COP30 would also have a role to play in agreeing global solutions.
- 3.6 Charlie McNichol-Fardon highlighted the importance of trust in ensuring 'green choices' and the importance of transparency and communication when there are issues. Paul Monks responded that there would be a multi-layered approach, with Government setting the tone, adding that GB Energy would work closely with community energy to help with community buy in.

#### **4. Executive Chair's Update (Oral)**

- 4.1 Iain Williams provided an update on some of the key activities since the previous Council meeting.

##### Recruitment

- 4.2 Interviews were held in October to recruit four new members to NERC Council. Four candidates had been recommended for appointment and pre-employment screening had recently been initiated. Announcements on the new members would be made in March.
- 4.3 Iain Williams informed Council that the recruitment campaign for the new Deputy Executive Chair was progressing and that the advertisement for the Chief Operating Officer, NERC was currently live.

##### NERC Showcase

- 4.4 Iain Williams commented that the NERC Showcase held in Cardiff in October had been very successful and expressed thanks, on behalf of Council, to all of those involved in its organisation.

##### Commercialisation

- 4.5 Iain Williams explained that Louise Heathwaite had recently met with Tony Soteriou, UKRI Director, Commercialisation and that Tony Soteriou had also met with research centre directors and leads of the *Changing the Environment* programme.

##### Building a Green Future and DSIT Research and Development Missions Programme (RDMP)

- 4.6 Kate Hamer explained that all funding allocated under the Building a Green Future (BaGF) theme at the previous Spending Review had now been committed and consideration was being given to how to evolve the theme as part of Spending Review Phase 2. She informed Council that a BaGF congress had been held in October which had been well attended by senior stakeholders across government, the private sector and academic community. She added that a BaGF 2024 portfolio review had recently been [published](#).
- 4.7 Kate Hamer explained that, as part of the autumn budget, the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology (DSIT) had secured funding for an R&D Missions programme in 2025/26 which UKRI was expected to lead, adding that it would be key to deliver impact in a quicker time frame. Kate Hamer informed Council that Louise Heathwaite was leading the Clean Energy Superpower mission for UKRI.

##### Aviation Assurance

- 4.8 Jen Jamieson-Ball informed Council that an Aviation Assurance Panel had been established approximately 18 months ago which she would chair on an interim basis following Alison Robinson's departure from NERC. She added that the annual statement from the panel had asked for the implementation plan and the development of the safety case to be sped up which would need some prioritisation of resource and that NERC was receiving advice from the UKRI Audit and Risk Assurance Committee, NERC Management Board and NERC Assurance Board. She noted that those involved with the panel had recently undertaken an intense training package and that it would be important to ensure the work of the panel continued to be effective.

##### Antarctic Inquiry

- 4.9 Iain Williams advised that the Environmental Audit Select Committee had reopened the

inquiry into the Antarctic which had been paused during the election period. He added that he and Jane Francis were due to give evidence to the inquiry next week.

## FAAM

4.10 Iain Williams informed Council that NERC had commissioned a report which the British Antarctic Survey had led on related to the use of uncrewed aerial vehicles (UAVs) looking at low carbon ways of undertaking NERC activities and how NERC might use these tools to advance environmental science. Iain Williams advised that there would be follow-on activity which would develop this further and seek to use the data more effectively.

4.11 Council asked how the momentum of the UKRI Strategic Themes could be maintained given the uncertainty of future funding for the themes. Kate Hamer responded that the themes had provided a mechanism for increased cross-council working and discussions were ongoing regarding further support which NERC would continue to advocate for.

4.12 Council asked for more information on the review of the research centres by UKRI and asked whether NERC should take a proactive approach. Iain Williams explained that the review would look at the cost base of all centres/institutes across UKRI. Kate Hamer added that a task and finish group had been newly established which Louise Heathwaite was a member of, noting that Stuart Wainwright, Chief Executive, UK Centre for Ecology and Hydrology, was working with the research centres to collate input which would feed into and engage with the discussion. Gideon Henderson noted that there would also be opportunities for the research centres to improve linkage with the Public Sector Research Establishments.

## **5. NERC Airborne Laboratory: Capability and Sustainability to 2040: Aircraft Mid-Life Upgrade (NERC 24/34) Slides, Item 5**

5.1 Rashik Parmar welcomed Stephen Mobbs, Director, National Centre for Atmospheric Science (NCAS) to the meeting. Stephen presented to Council under the following headings:

- the world-class science enabled by the Facility for Airborne Atmospheric Measurements (FAAM)
- the mid-life upgrade – objectives and progress
- future science and capabilities
- FAAM in context – international and building on 100 years of experience
- demonstrating the added value

5.2 Jennifer Jameson-Ball congratulated the FAAM project team and NCAS in carrying out the upgrade whilst the plane was still in operation, acknowledging the enormous effort involved given the complexity of the project.

5.3 Council noted the continued importance of monitoring vertical air pollution particularly given the changing patterns of pollution across the UK. Stephen Mobbs agreed that, were funding available, it would be useful to build up a long time series of data around the UK.

5.4 Council asked whether there remained any risks in upgrading an old aircraft rather than commissioning a new one. Stephen Mobbs explained that a new aircraft had been considered but there were challenges with this and that the community consultation had led to the decision to upgrade the aircraft to maintain both the capacity and the ability to fly at low heights.

5.5 Council asked whether there was an intention to collaborate internationally on the use of aircraft given that other aircraft in Europe had different capabilities. Stephen Mobbs commented that some progress had been made at a technological and certification level

although the main challenge remained in how to fund such joint projects.

- 5.6 Rashik Parmar thanked Stephen Mobbs for his presentation and for hosting NERC Council in Cranfield.

## **6. Update on the HMG Spending Review (Oral)**

- 6.1 Kate Hamer provided an overview on the current position with the Spending Review. Liam Haydon observed this item. Kate Hamer provided updates on the:

- outcomes from the autumn budget held in October
- allocations for 2025/26
- planning for the multi-year Spending Review from 2026

- 6.2 Kate Hamer informed Council that NERC did not currently have its allocation confirmed for the next financial year although she indicated that the planning assumption was for flat cash with a 2% reduction. She added that, given the existing funding commitments, there would be limited flexibility in the budget for 2025/26 and explained that the budgetary outcome was expected to be confirmed in March 2025.

- 6.3 Kate Hamer advised Council that His Majesty's Treasury (HMT) had not yet launched the next phase of the Spending Review which was expected to be a multi-year settlement. She added that this phase was currently expected to conclude in May/June 2025 and would be mission led, technology enabled and reform driven and it would be important to align the UKRI submission to these aims.

- 6.4 Kate Hamer advised that scenario planning for the multi-year SR was taking place across UKRI with positioning in line with Lord Vallance's five priorities as outlined during his evidence at the Science and Technology Committee:

- protecting curiosity-driven research
- development and translation of research and ideas into deployment – linked to government priorities, primarily described through the five missions
- supporting science and technology start-ups to scale-up, grow and stay in the UK
- ensuring science and R&D is a benefit to citizens, keeping 'citizen and societal need' central
- resilience and security, both protecting R&D but also the role R&D can play in supporting UK resilience and security

- 6.5 Gideon Henderson asked whether the UKRI themes, such as BaGF, would receive further funding in the SR. Kate Hamer confirmed that there was no new funding available for the themes in 2025/26 and any future funding would be considered as part of the multi-year SR.

- 6.6 Council asked whether there was any additional funding to address inflationary pressure and Kate Hamer confirmed that there was no additional funding and this would need to be found from existing budgets.

## **7. NERC Forward Look (NERC 24/35) Slides, Item 7**

- 7.1 Kate Hamer presented this item to ask for feedback from Council on the draft *Forward Look for Environmental Science*. Liam Haydon observed this item.

- 7.2 Kate Hamer reminded Council that the purpose of the Forward Look was to set a direction of travel for NERC, including high level priorities, over the next ten years. The Forward Look was being developed in consultation with a wide range of stakeholders with a final draft to be reviewed by NERC Council in March 2025.

7.3 Kate Hamer outlined some of the draft key messages within the Forward Look in terms of the NERC offer:

- our science underpins UK prosperity
- from local to global
- harnessing new technology

7.4 Kate Hamer highlighted the draft thematic areas explaining that these were interconnected:

- Green growth: driving an environmentally responsible Net Zero transition
- Environmental security: contributing to the global stability and shared prosperity
- Responsible innovation: evidence to enable nature positive innovation, green growth, and effective regulation

and supported by three enabling foundations: National Capability; Frontiers of knowledge; partnerships.

7.5 In discussion, Council raised the following points:

- the importance of the narrative and ensuring people and organisations can ‘see’ themselves within the document
- the importance of ‘local’ and more emphasis on how NERC can accelerate change
- more careful use of language, especially of the terms ‘green,’ and ‘green growth’ which primarily refers to technology within the document noting that there was limited reference to biodiversity and ecology
- be clear on what is meant by nature (it’s a broad word) and the difference between how nature is viewed by the public vs the environmental science community
- clarification on what is meant by National Capability including that Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) are part of the UK’s national capability
- partnerships – where are they and what should they be
- the NERC response to how NERC is addressing its own environmental impact, such as from aircraft, ships etc
- more depth in what NERC wants to achieve with industry – positioning NERC as a critical partner
- more specific examples of what NERC might want to do (rather than general statements)
- a need to address the limited mention of universities or HEIs which will be delivering a lot of the work – make this more explicit
- Frontiers of Knowledge section - needs more on the importance of basic science which will lead to economic and social benefit
- more emphasis on international needed – needs a paragraph of its own
- more emphasis on the global nature of NERC
- limited mention of disciplines within NERC
- more on training and skills
- more of a sense of urgency needed
- the document should reflect a high level of ambition in its tone – emphasise the NERC role in this critical moment in history

7.6 Kate thanked members for their valuable input which would be considered when revising the document further.

## **8 Strategic Research Investment to achieve NERC ambitions (NERC 24/36)**

8.1 Sarah Turner advised Council that five ideas for Strategic Programme Investment were reviewed by Science Committee in October who ranked the ideas in order of priority for funding.

- 8.2 Sarah Turner informed Council that all investments had been deemed fundable by Science Committee although the funding available would mean that only the top two were affordable.
- 8.3 Rashik Parmar explained that the two investments which Council was being asked to recommend for investment were:
- New Data Science and AI for Environmental Science
  - Managing the Environmental Impact Antifungal Resistance through a Network+
- 8.4 Gideon Henderson commented that he was supportive of the recommendation and asked whether there had been opportunities to leverage funding from Government departments for the three investments which were not affordable at this time. Sarah Turner commented that some discussions on co-funding had taken place and that Departmental commitments on co-funding were dependent on Spending Review outcomes and that discussions on opportunities for co-funding would continue.
- 8.5 Council supported the funding of the top two investments and agreed that the other three should also be funded should co-funding become available and NERC budget allow.
- DECISION: Council supported the funding of the two top-ranked Strategic Research Investments**

## **9. Trusted Research (Oral) Slides, Item 9**

- 9.1 Jonathan Dawes, EPSRC Deputy Executive Chair and UKRI lead for Trusted Research and Innovation (TR&I) joined the meeting to provide an overview of this topic. The update included: a summary of relevant legislation; NERC-specific TR&I governance and some recent examples from NERC which had been discussed by the TR&I Programme Board.
- 9.2 Council commented that this was an area of substantial interest within the university sector and asked how UKRI ensured the work it was conducting did not add duplication of effort or a further layer of bureaucracy. Jonathan Dawes commented that UKRI was working closely with universities and agreed that there needed to be alignment and shared responsibility without adding unnecessary bureaucracy.
- 9.3 Iain Williams raised the issue of the representative roles, for example on international committees, which were a distinct activity, outside the grant and research collaboration remit and how to ensure that these were captured in considering the risks of TR&I. David Hannah commented that consideration should be given to this as a potential reputational risk.
- 9.4 Jonathan Dawes commented that it would be important to ensure that the university sector had the autonomy to formulate their own approach and institutional policy within their own risk appetite. He added that UKRI was encouraging universities to formulate their own approaches, informed by knowledge from sector bodies, the security agencies, the Research Collaboration Advice Team (RCAT) and funders, which would lead to a sense of shared responsibility between UKRI and the sector.
- 9.5 Council asked what the obligations were for researchers to disclose the provenance of data sources with respect to generative Artificial Intelligence. Iain Williams responded that NERC did not currently have its own specific policy, but that there were wider policies in UKRI.

## **10. Future Marine Research Infrastructure (NERC 24/37) Slides, item 10**

- 10.1 Iain Williams introduced this item to update Council on activity so far with the programme for investment in Future Marine Research Infrastructure (FMRI) and outlined the timescales. Leigh Storey, Senior Responsible Officer for FMRI, observed this item via Teams.



10.2 Iain Williams explained that NERC had consulted widely with the community to understand the future scientific challenges which would help to determine the scientific requirements for future infrastructure. He added that draft papers, setting out the scientific requirements, had now been published on the FMRI website.

10.3 Iain Williams outlined the six infrastructure investment options which had been agreed at a shortlisting workshop:

- Business as usual (retire James Cook and retire autonomous fleet)
- Do minimum (retire James Cook and maintain autonomous fleet)
- Option 1 (build a new ship and maintain autonomous fleet)
- Option 2 (maintain James Cook and develop networked autonomy)
- Option 3 (retire James Cook and develop networked autonomy)
- Preferred way forward (build a new ship and develop networked autonomy)

10.4 Iain Williams informed Council that NERC was engaging with a wide range of stakeholders including in government, industry and internationally.

10.5 Council commented that it would also be important to consider what lies below the ocean in the planning for FMRI. Iain Williams confirmed that was included in the considerations, recognising the specific requirements in this area.

10.6 Gideon Henderson commented on looking at new technologies, measurements and data processing tools that might be transformative. He added that NERC might also consider alternative options, such as partnering with the Centre for Environment, Fisheries and Aquaculture Science (Cefas).

10.7 Council asked whether they might have sight of the outcome of the work on partnerships which would put forward their recommendations in December. Iain Williams agreed to report back to Council on progress.

**ACTION: item to be added to the rolling programme to report back on the outcome of the work on partnerships**

10.8 Council asked for further clarity on the disadvantages of choosing Option 2 over the preferred option. Iain Williams explained that significant investment would be required to prolong the use of the RRS *James Cook* which would impact on the investment which might be made in autonomy, noting that this was, however, a viable option.

10.9 Council asked whether NERC was engaging widely with government departments, such as the Ministry of Defence, on the use of technology and Iain Williams confirmed this was being considered.

## **11. NERC Demand Management Approaches (NERC 24/38)**

11.1 Liesbeth Renders introduced this item to outline the changes proposed to the NERC demand management (DM) approach. She explained that changes were required due to the low success rates and high number of applications leading to inefficient use of time both for the applicants and reviewers.

11.2 Liesbeth Renders explained that the proposal was to align the NERC DM methodology with that used by UKRI and to pilot this new approach on the *Exploring the Frontiers* programme to test the revised methodology. She added that, if the pilot was successful, it would be rolled out to other NERC schemes.

11.3 Council raised some concerns regarding the proposed approach which appeared to be reducing the potential number of applications for universities with a higher full-time equivalent (FTE) and detrimental to universities that were currently successful. Liesbeth

Renders commented that NERC would be required to align with the UKRI approach going forward and that this was an opportunity to test the methodology.

11.4 Council commented that the proposed approach appeared to be concentrated on the quantity of applications rather than quality and expressed concern regarding the distribution, as outlined in the matrix within the document, which would impact, in particular, research-intensive universities. Council asked whether a move to accepting proposals throughout the year might be worth considering as this may affect the number of applications received.

11.5 David Hannah noted that there were significant pressures on head office and colleagues in reviewing grants, adding that there was also pressure at university level in peer reviewing of applications. He was supportive of the pilot, suggesting that views from Science Committee were captured in the planning stages and that there was clear communication for the community on the rationale for the change.

11.6 Council asked what the metrics of success for the pilot were, particularly in terms of the quality of applications received rather than purely a reduction in administrative effort.

11.7 Council asked for NERC to consider an alternative proposal given the concerns raised by members. Tracy Shimmield commented that it would remain important to conduct a pilot as an opportunity to test the revised methodology and agreed to seek feedback, via correspondence, on an amended proposal based on the comments raised at the meeting.

**ACTION: an alternative demand management proposal to be circulated to Council members for review via correspondence**

## **12. Update by Chief Scientific Adviser, Defra (Oral)**

12.1 Gideon Henderson provided an update under the following headings:

- Spending review phase one outcomes
- Spending review phase two
- R&D mission
- Government department priorities
- Discovery science – opportunity for promotion
- Climate
- Biodiversity
- EU/Horizon
- CSA role at Defra currently being advertised

## **13. NERC Council Finance Report September 2024 (NERC 24/39)**

13.1 Wendy Selby-Brown introduced this item to set the financial context for the current financial year. She reminded Council that NERC was subject, along with the other research councils, to budget reductions in 2024/25 which were categorised in two stages adding that Target 1 had been achieved in May, with Target 2 now confirmed and due to be delivered by end March 2025.

13.2 Wendy Selby-Brown commented that the Antarctic Logistics Infrastructure (ALI) budget was ringfenced and, therefore, not subject to any reductions. She explained that the budget was in deficit for 2024/25, due to inflationary pressures, and informed Council that UKRI has now agreed to provide additional funding to deal with this pressure.

13.3 Wendy Selby-Brown explained that Annex A of the finance paper provided the current budgetary position and showed that NERC currently had an underspend which would be used to achieve Target 2 and deal with other current budgetary pressures.

- 13.4 Wendy Selby-Brown informed Council that NERC was expected to meet its targets on operational expenditure and headcount.
- 13.5 Gideon Henderson commented that the financial position for NERC had improved since Council last met. Kate Hamer noted that the transition to the new funding service had caused some delays to funding commitments within some of the research councils and this had impacted the position for the 2024/25 financial year.
- 13.6 Council asked what impact the increase in National Insurance (NI) contributions would have. Wendy Selby-Brown advised that UKRI was in discussion with DSIT to clarify the expected impact of the NI increases on UKRI. The impact on UKRI of this change is expected to be confirmed as part of the allocations process for 2025/26.

#### **14. NERC Top Risks – Quarterly Risk Review (NERC 24/40)**

- 14.1 Tracy Shimmield introduced this item which provided Council with an opportunity to review NERC's top risks, note any changes since the previous meeting and highlight any risks which may be missing.
- 14.2 Council asked for clarification on risks which were included on this register and risks which might be covered elsewhere, for example, related to the research vessels. Iain Williams confirmed that these risks were grouped together under major infrastructure on the risk register. He added that the register included the top risks but there were additional risks which sat at both directorate and research centre level.
- 14.3 Council highlighted the risk related to senior leadership team succession planning and knowledge transfer which was still assigned to Alison Robinson and currently within appetite. It was agreed to review this risk and re-assign it.  
**ACTION: risk on senior leadership team succession planning to be reviewed and re-assigned**
- 14.4 Charlie McNichol-Fardon asked whether NERC was obliged to report against the Task Force for Climate Related and Financial Disclosures (TCFD) and whether the risk framework was aligned to the NERC risk register. Iain Williams responded that our understanding was that NERC was not subject to TCFD although we would continue to actively manage our financial reporting obligations and take action as necessary.

#### **15. NERC Assurance Board (agenda and minutes) (NERC 24/41)**

- 15.1 Rashik Parmer introduced this item to inform Council of any issues arising from the 12<sup>th</sup> meeting of the NERC Assurance Board held in October 2024.
- 15.2 Rashik Parmer informed Council that one of the key discussion items had been on the airbridge in Antarctica, noting that an interim plan was now in place. Jen Jamieson-Ball added that an external project assurance review was due to start in January and advised that the British Antarctic Survey was considering extending the use of the Dash-7 as an interim solution and that opportunities to share facilities with international partners were also being explored.

#### **16. NERC Science Committee (agenda and minutes) (NERC 24/42)**

- 16.1 David Hannah introduced this item to inform Council of key matters discussed at the 21<sup>st</sup> meeting of NERC Science Committee.
- 16.2 David Hannah informed Council that Science Committee had last met in October at UKCEH, Wallingford and expressed his thanks to those members who had attended their last meeting. Topics for discussion had included: the annual review of Science Committee

Terms of Reference; Policy Fellowships; Independent Research Fellowships; Highlight Topic (HT) evaluation; FMRI; scoping a large-scale investment in data science; horizon scanning and Strategic Research Investments (SRI).

16.3 David Hannah outlined the proposed amendments to the Science Committee Terms of Reference and these amendments were agreed by Council.

16.4 David Hannah advised Council that the next meeting of Science Committee would take place in March. The items for discussion would include: outcomes of the insight work; Horizon scanning by Science Committee for input into the Forward Look; HT evaluation; UKRI infrastructure roadmap; place; update on Diversity Action plan; development of the international strategy. David Hannah reminded Council members that there was a standing invitation to attend a Science Committee in an observer capacity.

16.5 David Hannah informed Council that four new members had been appointed to Science Committee and would commence their tenures in January 2025: Dr Ekbal Hussain, BGS; Professor Stefan Reis, German Aerospace Centre (DRL); Dr Theresa Mercer, Cranfield University and Professor Caroline Lear, Cardiff University. He added that it had also been decided to re-appoint Professor Jane Hill for an additional two years.

## **17. NERC Future Leaders Council (agenda and minutes) (NERC 24/43)**

17.1 Charlie McNichol-Fardon informed Council that two members had recently demitted from the Future Leaders Council (FLC) and she thanked them for their contributions, adding that two new members had recently been recruited to cover the areas of sustainability and digital.

17.2 Charlie McNichol-Fardon invited members to provide their thoughts on offering other opportunities to FLC members in the future to ensure there was a legacy, noting that she would meet with Tracy Shimmield to discuss this further. She thanked Alison Robinson for her excellent support in establishing and supporting the FLC since its inception.

17.3 Charlie McNichol-Fardon thanked David Hannah for the recent invitation to attend Science Committee, noting that there was a lot of crossover in terms of discussions held at SC and FLC.

17.4 Charlie McNichol-Fardon informed Council that the FLC had last met in November in Exeter and thanked Kevin Gaston for the excellent RENEW project talks from his team. She highlighted some of the topics under discussion which included: Public Engagement Strategy Workshop; NERC Estate Biodiversity; D&I data; Digital Strategy; Forward Look.

## **18. Rolling programme of business) (NERC 24/44)**

18.1 Helen Page reminded Council members that suggestions for agenda items might be submitted to her at any point.

18.2 Council asked for an item to be added to the rolling programme on working with, and sustainability of, the university sector.

**ACTION: Item to be added to the rolling programme on working with, and sustainability of, the university sector**

## **19. Any Other Business (Oral)**

19.1 Clare Matterson informed Council that a review was being carried out by the Royal Society 40 years on from the Bodmer report, which funders might wish to provide input into.