



Natural
Environment
Research Council

Minutes of the 30th meeting of NERC Council in UK Research and Innovation

NATURAL ENVIRONMENT RESEARCH COUNCIL

Thirtieth meeting of NERC Council in UK Research and Innovation held at the Department of Earth Sciences, University of Oxford on Thursday, 25 September 2025.

Members present:

Professor Louise Heathwaite (Chair), Cathrine Armour, Professor Richard Bardgett, Professor Hannah Cloke, Professor Peter Cox, Professor Kevin Gaston, Professor Mike Kendall, Michael Lewis, Clare Matterson, Rashik Parmar, Professor John Pyle

Observers:

Christine Foster (part), NERC Non-Executive Director, Professor David Hannah, Chair, NERC Science Committee, Professor Anjali Goswami, CSA, Defra, Charlie McNichol-Fardon, Chair, Future Leaders Council

NERC Directors (Head Office): Kim Bond (NERC Chief Operating Officer), Dr Kate Hamer (NERC Director of Strategy and Performance), Jen Jamieson-Ball (Interim Director, Major Projects 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: Stian Westlake (item 4, via Teams), Fiona Goff (item 5, via Teams), Dr Liam Haydon, (item 6, via Teams), Alice Summers (items 8-9), Jordan Lips (items 8-9, via Teams), Oliver Knevitt (item 10, via Teams), Sarah Turner (item 11)

Secretariat: Helen Page, Katrina Lewis

Introductory items

1. Executive Chair's welcome, unconfirmed minutes of the 29th meeting of NERC Council and Decisions and Actions (NERC 25/21, NERC 25/22)

- 1.1 Louise Heathwaite welcomed members to the thirtieth meeting of NERC Council and noted that apologies had been received for the meeting from Nick Folland and Kim Shillinglaw.
- 1.2 Louise Heathwaite welcomed Christine Foster and Professor Anjali Goswami to their first meeting as observers on NERC Council.
- 1.3 Louise Heathwaite advised Council that this would be the last meeting for both Rashik Parmar and Charlie McNichol-Fardon and thanked them for their valuable contributions to NERC as the Senior Independent Member, NERC Council and Chair, NERC Future Leaders Council respectively.

- 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 Birthday Honours:
- **Professor Peter Cox CBE**
Professor of Climate System Dynamics in Mathematics, University of Exeter.
CBE for services to Science and to Climate Modelling
 - **Professor Gabriele Hegerl CBE FRS FRSE**
Professor of Climate System Science, University of Edinburgh.
CBE for services to Climate Science
 - **Professor Emily Shuckburgh CBE OBE**
Professor of Environmental Data Science and Director, Cambridge Zero, University of Cambridge.
CBE for services to Climate Science and to the Public Communication of Climate Science
 - **Professor Michael Bentley OBE**
Professor of Geography, Durham University.
OBE for services to Antarctic and Sub-Antarctic Science.
 - **Professor Andrew Charlton-Pérez OBE**
Professor of Meteorology, University of Reading.
OBE for services to Climate Science and to Education
 - **Dr Jolene Cook OBE**
Head of International Climate Science, Department for Energy Security and Net Zero.
OBE for services to International Climate Science
 - **Professor Timothy Lenton OBE**
Founding Director, Global Systems Institute, University of Exeter, and Chair in Climate Change and Earth System Science
OBE for services to Understanding Climate Tipping Points
 - **Professor Susan Page MBE**
Professor of Physical Geography, University of Leicester.
MBE for services to Peatland and Climate Research
 - **Julie Pringle-Stewart MBE**
Chief Finance Officer and Chief Operating Officer, National Oceanography Centre.
MBE for services to Ocean Science
 - **Professor Lindsay Stringer MBE**
Professor of Environment and Development, University of York.
MBE for services to Environmental Development
- 1.7 Louise Heathwaite asked members for any amendments and matters arising from the minutes of the previous meeting. No amendments were made, and the minutes of the twenty-ninth meeting were confirmed as an accurate record.

2. Executive Chair's Update (Oral)

- 2.1 Louise Heathwaite reminded Council that Ian Chapman had formally started as the UKRI CEO in August 2025. She added that a new mission statement for UKRI was being developed which would reflect the renewed focus on delivering outcomes, advancing knowledge and improving lives and livelihoods. Louise Heathwaite commented that it would be important to demonstrate the role that NERC can play in meeting the ambition of government to grow the economy.
- 2.2 Louise Heathwaite explained that a meeting was due to take place in October of the newly established UKRI Senior Leadership Group which would comprise the Executive Chairs and their direct reports plus the UKRI senior leaders.
- 2.3 Louise Heathwaite explained that Ian Chapman was focused on the role of UKRI in supporting delivering the Industrial Strategy with Executive Chairs leading on specific sectors, adding that she would lead on Clean Energy and Growth.
- 2.4 Louise Heathwaite commented that the allocation from the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology (DSIT) to UKRI for 2026/27 would be known in the autumn, with significant preparatory activity ongoing.
- 2.5 Council asked whether university investment and improving communication between universities and government was being considered. Louise Heathwaite added that this was under consideration as part of a wider piece of work adding that the reset with DSIT would also help. She emphasised the continued importance of close working with the Chief Scientific Advisers across government.
- 2.6 Council asked whether there was a clear metric for green growth and how one might be agreed. Louise Heathwaite confirmed that there was not yet a clear metric and this would require further thought.
- 2.7 Council expressed concern should there be a move away from fundamental research and asked whether this was a risk that needed to be considered. Louise Heathwaite commented that the Minister of State for Science, Innovation, Research and Nuclear, Lord Vallance, had three main focus areas and curiosity driven research was the largest of these areas and would remain important given its role in the ideas pipeline.
- 2.8 Louise Heathwaite informed Council that Professor Gideon Henderson had recently been announced as the incoming Senior Independent Member from 1 October 2025, adding that three new Council members were also expected to join in April 2026.
- 2.9 Louise Heathwaite informed Council that NERC would be advertising for the role of Director, Research and Innovation and invited Council to send through suggestions for suitable applicants.
- 2.10 Kate Hamer provided an update on recent activity at UKRI under the following headings:
 - UKRI strategy under development, due for publication in spring/summer 2026
 - cross-organisational work ongoing to agree a set of UKRI objectives and key results (OKR's) to be delivered in this financial year
 - [Local Innovation Partnerships Fund](#)
 - [Global Talent Fund](#)
 - R&D missions accelerator programme (Louise leading on Clean Energy Superpower Mission)

- 2.11 Jen Jamieson-Ball outlined some recent activities related to celebrating 'NERC at 60' which had included taking the RRS *Discovery* to Dundee in September. She expressed her thanks to the Dundee Heritage Trust and to the teams within NERC and the National Oceanography Centre (NOC) who had made the event a success. She added that a further event was planned for October, Science in Stormont, hosted by the Royal Society of Chemistry.

3. NERC Deputy Executive Chair and NERC Chief Operating Officer updates (Oral) Slides, item 3

- 3.1 Louise Heathwaite introduced this item and explained that it was intended to provide updates from Directors at each Council meeting going forwards.

ACTION: Directors update to be added to the rolling programme

- 3.2 Rupert Lewis informed Council that his update would include an overview of his role as Deputy Executive Chair and some context and perspectives since joining NERC five months ago.
- 3.3 Rupert Lewis outlined his primary responsibilities which include: leadership and management; delivery architecture; research and skills; government policy and knowledge exploitation. He explained that he intended to review NERC funding lines with a view to becoming a more agile financial organisation.
- 3.4 Rupert Lewis commented on the significant changes within UKRI and NERC, noting that the *Forward Look* would help to guide some of the short term, rapid decisions required for both the Spending Review and zero-based allocations process. He added that sustainable economic growth would be key and innovative approaches would be needed.
- 3.5 Kim Bond provided an update on her responsibilities which include: governance, risk, assurance; health and safety and major programmes and estates. She added that operational, financial and organisational sustainability of the organisation was an initial key focus.
- 3.6 Kim Bond commented that the move to objective based risks in NERC was a positive step which would help to embed active risk management across the organisation. She added that it would be important to ensure assurance activity, including aviation and maritime, aligned with the risk management approach.
- 3.7 Kim Bond outlined an intention to move to a clearer portfolio management office model to support major programmes activity. She commented on some key governance areas more generally, including the various agreements with centres, with a view to potentially updating these where required, as well as updating the associated governance and assurance mechanisms between NERC and the centres. Kim Bond commented that it would also be important to review opportunities related to the estates portfolio to ensure financial sustainability.

Items for discussion

4. ESRC Forward Look: Stian Westlake, ESRC Executive Chair (Oral) Slides, item 4

- 4.1 Louise Heathwaite welcomed Stian Westlake, ESRC Executive Chair, to his first NERC Council meeting.
- 4.2 Stian Westlake informed Council that ESRC was celebrating its 60th anniversary in 2025 and outlined the rationale for establishing ESRC which was based on two principles: impact and methodological innovation.

- 4.3 Stian Westlake explained that the future plan for ESRC included consideration of both fundamental and impact-focused investments. As part of this, ESRC was refreshing its applicant-led mode for curiosity-driven research to understand society and focusing on better outcomes for citizens, economic growth and technological progress.
- 4.4 Stian Westlake outlined some of the existing ESRC investments of relevance to NERC: environmental economics; the psychology of environmental behaviours and how to deliver a successful climate transition. He added that some areas under discussion were: the financial architecture of climate transition and how to sustainably fund data infrastructure.
- 4.5 Council asked how NERC and ESRC might improve collaborative working across data sets to create new insights. Stian Westlake responded that data linkage was a key focus, explaining that Administrative Data Research UK (ADR UK) was seeking to link research data sets from administrative sources and make these available to researchers. He added that it would be valuable to identify some high value data linkages and also consider whether there was any joint data collection work that ESRC and NERC might want to do.
- 4.6 Council asked how ESRC might help in demonstrating that environmental research produced long-term savings of benefit to the general public so that we might convince stakeholders in a more coherent way. Stian Westlake commented that there had been some work done on environmental economics and offered to connect NERC with relevant people in the environmental economics community.
- 4.7 Council asked for more detail on the concept of data as infrastructure, noting that more thought might be given to data as a byproduct and to metrics and standardisation. Stian Westlake responded that it would be important to build infrastructure that was useable. Louise Heathwaite suggested that a future joint meeting with ESRC to explore this point further might be helpful.
- ACTION: joint meeting with ESRC and NERC Council to be scheduled on the rolling programme**
- 4.8 Council asked whether there was any insight on how Artificial Intelligence was going to drive productivity growth and whether there was a risk of misallocation of resource. Stian Westlake commented that research related to AI was currently speculative, adding that it was too early for useful research investments.

5. Capturing the economic and societal impact of NERC research (NERC 25/23) *Slides, item 5*

- 5.1 Kate Hamer introduced this item. Fiona Goff observed this item.
- 5.2 Kate Hamer informed Council that there was a renewed focus on impact and outcomes to ensure that UKRI was maximising the value of its investments in contributing to economic growth and supporting delivery of the Industrial Strategy and the Government missions.
- 5.3 Kate Hamer explained that NERC had recently commissioned an independent economic analysis of the impact of NERC funded research in offshore wind and the economic value it had provided to the UK. She also outlined how NERC contributed to policy innovation, working in collaboration with partners, in the case of natural flood management.
- 5.4 Kate Hamer invited Council to comment on: the areas proposed for future work outlined within annex B of the paper; other potential topics where NERC has delivered impact and on opportunities for NERC to gain more strategic value from the evidence gathered.

5.5 Council was supportive of the information supplied and, in discussion, outlined some further suggestions for consideration:

- defence technology
- more emphasis on natural resources
- investigate further NERC funded activity which goes on to be funded by Innovate UK
- air quality
- extreme weather events such as heatwaves and droughts
- use of information captured in Researchfish
- asking 'users' for their feedback on what is produced
- consider the 'POSTnotes' format as a way of presenting NERC impact
- use of videos, especially short reels on social media platforms such as YouTube
- focus on place and potential use of regional Mayors as advocates
- distribution of narratives across a wide stakeholder base in government to help collaboration
- responsible metrics and commercialisation

5.6 Kate Hamer informed Council that a new appointment had recently been made to improve our ability to land impact and outcomes evidence with key stakeholders.

5.7 David Hannah commented that universities have a lot of experience in producing impact case studies which might be useful. Louise Heathwaite noted that it had recently been agreed with Research England to provide access to NERC to the relevant information they collect.

6. UKRI allocations (NERC 25/24) Slide, item 6

6.1 Louise Heathwaite introduced this item to update Council on progress with the Spending Review allocations. Liam Haydon observed this item.

6.2 Louise Heathwaite outlined an emerging framework for the allocations process with a focus on improving lives and livelihoods and outlined five priority areas for NERC which had been identified as part of the process. She added that a discussion was scheduled at Executive Committee soon.

6.3 Kate Hamer explained that the *Forward Look* had helped in identifying priorities, noting that the allocations process remained at an early stage and decisions were not expected until later in the year.

6.4 Council asked where the biodiversity crisis was captured. Louise Heathwaite responded that this was included in 'adaptation for growth', noting that there was more to do in terms of scaling, identifying the skill requirements and how it added value in terms of lives and livelihoods.

6.5 Council acknowledged that this had been a significant piece of work and asked whether there was opportunity for wider input. Louise Heathwaite commented that it had not been possible in the timeframe but input would be sought where feasible.

6.6 Council suggested that 'green skills' should be defined more broadly than they are currently.

6.7 Council asked how UKRI was defining the focus of financial services. Louise Heathwaite responded that it would need to be broadly defined to capture the interest of the financial services sector.

6.8 David Hannah added that Science Committee would be undertaking a horizon scanning exercise, linked to the *Forward Look*, at its next meeting.

7. NERC Council Finance Report (NERC 25/25)

- 7.1 Wendy Selby-Brown introduced this item and outlined the position for the current financial year.
- 7.2 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, adding that challenges in making payments to suppliers caused by the introduction of the new Oracle Fusion system might impact this.
- 7.3 Wendy Selby-Brown confirmed that the Operational Expenditure (OpEx) budget for 2025/26 was now approved. She explained that, due to increased scrutiny in the number of staff working in centres and institutes across UKRI, it had been decided to put in place a recruitment freeze at both BAS and BGS.
- 7.4 Council asked whether the recruitment freeze was a short-term measure. Kim Bond explained that it was a temporary measure to allow NERC to better understand the composition of the workforce and to explore ways in which UKRI might further support the centres.
- 7.5 Council asked for clarity on the figures produced in the UKRI explainer (annex C). Kim Bond responded that some of the data definitions might be improved.

8. NERC Council Quarterly Risk Review (NERC 25/26)

- 8.1 Kim Bond introduced this item and thanked Jordan Lips for his support in leading on the transition to objective based risks for NERC.
- 8.2 Jordan Lips informed Council that good progress had been made in implementing the agreed NERC Strategic Risk Framework. He added that an assessment of all open risks was provided in annex B of the paper which helped to identify gaps, trends and how strategic risk areas were currently represented on the risks system.
- 8.3 Jordan Lips explained that the NERC Executive had agreed ownership of the nine objective risks and their sub-risk areas as outlined in annex B, noting that overall ownership remained with the NERC Executive Chair. He added that, in future, NERC Council would be provided with updates on these nine objective risks rather than the top 22 risks reported on currently.
- 8.4 Jordan Lips commented that a cultural change in considering risk management would need to be implemented, adding that this would be driven through training and embedding risk support networks to promote best practice.
- 8.5 Council commented that it would be important to consider universities within the nine objective risks. Louise Heathwaite agreed that it was important to empower the whole scientific community which included universities. Alice Summers added that financial sustainability of the research system was a key risk for the UKRI Board with significant work in progress as to how this might be mitigated.
- 8.6 Council noted the considerable concern related to cyber security risk and asked what UKRI was doing to mitigate this and whether UKRI was sharing learning in this area, for example, with the centres. Alice Summers informed Council that there would be an item on cyber security at the next UKRI Board meeting and a deep dive at Executive Committee (ExCo) on IT systems. She added that UKRI also had a Cyber Security Working Group.
- 8.7 Jordan Lips provided an update on the NERC top risks highlighting key updates and risks being proposed for closure.

9. UKRI Risk and Assurance (Oral) Slides, item 9

- 9.1 Louise Heathwaite welcomed Alice Summers to NERC Council. Jordan Lips observed this item.

[at the meeting this item was taken prior to item 8]

- 9.2 Alice Summers introduced herself as the Head of UKRI Risk and Assurance and outlined some of the key activities underway as part of a review of the UKRI Risk and Management Framework. She added that new approaches were being developed to refresh all of the top level risk registers by adopting an objective centric approach which was also being adopted in NERC.
- 9.3 Louise Heathwaite welcomed the review and the new approach which provided a more schematic view of risk. Council was also supportive of the approach.

10. NERC Infrastructure Fund Proposals (NERC 25/27)

- 10.1 Iain Williams introduced this item. Oliver Knevitt observed this item.
- 10.2 Iain Williams informed Council that NERC had submitted two proposed new infrastructures into the UKRI Infrastructure Fund:
- Future Marine Research Infrastructure (FMRI)
 - Environmental Data Research UK (EDRUK)
- 10.3 Iain Williams explained that the outcome from the Infrastructure Fund bids would be known by March 2026 and that planning was underway for a range of scenarios, adding that NERC was continuing to engage with stakeholders in developing the business cases. He commented that Council would be further engaged once the outcome of the bids was known.
- 10.4 Council commented that it would be important to also consider the solid earth beneath the oceans within the FMRI bid. Iain Williams confirmed that this was being considered as part of marine infrastructure.
- 10.5 Anjali Goswami asked whether discussions with partners on FMRI had taken place. Iain Williams responded that conversations with the Centre for Environment Fisheries and Aquaculture Science (CEFAS) were ongoing, noting that there were some regulatory barriers in moving to autonomy. Anjali Goswami added that it would be important to address, in advance, the requirement to adjust regulations for this new way of collecting data.
- 10.6 David Hannah commented that Science Committee was supportive of the proposals, noting that the FMRI bid was significant in terms of managing the carbon pathway risk.
- 10.7 Jen Jamieson-Ball suggested circulating a link to the UK Science Requirements Framework for Future Marine Research Infrastructure published recently. Iain Williams added that it would be important for members to promote the need for these investments within their communities.
- ACTION: link to the UK Science Requirements Framework for Future Marine Research Infrastructure to be circulated**

11. International (Oral) Slides, item 11

- 11.1 Rupert Lewis introduced this item on reviewing NERC's international approach. Sarah Turner observed this item.

- 11.2 Rupert Lewis commented that NERC had a role to play in leading international science and had historically been constrained, mostly of overseas development programmes, and wished now to direct activities more to NERC's own *Forward Look* objectives. He outlined the international collective fund trends which demonstrated the difficulty in sustaining international activity and relationships.
- 11.3 Rupert Lewis outlined some of the key drivers for reviewing the international approach which included:
- geopolitical change
 - new framings, including: the NERC *Forward Look*; the Government's Industrial Strategy; R&D missions; the UKRI zero based review and the importance of science demonstrating value in times of challenging fiscal constraint
- 11.4 Rupert Lewis outlined some of the issues under consideration which included: the importance of measuring/evidencing the outcomes from international funding; how to ensure the framing supported real strategic choices and the approach to prioritisation for collaborations to bring added benefit. He added that NERC intended to be more targeted and specific with international collaboration in the future with Louise Heathwaite commenting that NERC intended to take a bolder approach to international activity and lead activity with key partners.
- 11.5 Council cautioned the interpretation of citation data, noting this should be used carefully as a measure.
- 11.6 Council asked whether it was possible to further analyse the data to identify key strategic partnerships. Rupert Lewis agreed it would be useful to explore this further.
- 11.7 Council asked whether there had been any consideration of opportunities for collaboration within the Yuxi circle ¹ and in Africa.
- 11.8 Louise Heathwaite asked if the relationships built under the Global Challenges Research Fund (GCRF) had endured and it was confirmed that they had mostly endured with alternative funding needing to be sourced.
- 11.9 David Hannah highlighted the importance of working with international scientific networks and Rupert Lewis confirmed this would be key, particularly in helping to leverage additional funding.
- 11.10 Council asked whether the aim of reviewing the NERC international approach was to bring more coherence on themes or to look at alternative sources of funding by making a stronger case. Rupert Lewis confirmed it was both of these.

12. NERC Council annual self-assessment (NERC 25/28)

- 12.1 Rashik Parmar introduced this item to present the results of the NERC Council annual self-assessment.
- 12.2 Rashik Parmar commented that many of the areas within the self-assessment had either maintained or improved their scores since the previous self-assessment, noting that there were some recommendations contained within the paper for areas where scores had decreased.
- 12.3 Council highlighted the scores for both Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) and sustainability and asked what more might be done in these areas. Louise Heathwaite

¹ [The Yuxi Circle: The World's Most Densely Populated Area](#)

commented that she was the Senior Responsible Owner (SRO) for UKRI on sustainability with a paper due to be discussed at ExCo soon.

- 12.4 Michaela Simpson added that UKRI was re-visiting its strategy on EDI with a move to viewing this through a 'risk' lens and working collectively on issues related to EDI rather than at an individual Council level. She added that a discussion was due to take place at ExCo in December and it would be useful to schedule a discussion with Council following this.

ACTION: Item to be added to rolling programme on EDI for March 2026

13. Update by Chief Scientific Adviser, Defra (Oral)

- 13.1 Anjali Goswami explained that she had joined as the CSA, Defra in July adding that her initial focus had been in seeking to co-ordinate activity and foster an integrated approach to R&D across government.

- 13.2 Anjali Goswami provided an update under the following headings:

- monitoring
- pollution
- land use reform
- environmental resilience
- climate adaptation
- government priorities and how they shape individual priorities
- metrics for nature and environment
- innovation
- international leadership
- earth observation
- Spending Review
- Defra R&D fellowship programme
- Defra collaborations

14. Agenda and unconfirmed minutes: Science Committee (NERC 25/29)

- 14.1 David Hannah introduced this item to inform Council of key matters discussed at the 23rd meeting of NERC Science Committee.
- 14.2 David Hannah informed Council that Science Committee had last met on 2 July. Topics for discussion had included: Science Committee governance update; Strategic Research Initiatives (SRI) and *Forward Look* ambitions; SRI investment metrics; Highlight Topic Evaluation; overview of UKRI international; insight capabilities; EDRUK; National Capability update.
- 14.3 David Hannah advised Council that the next meeting of Science Committee would take place on 15 and 16 October at the Lyell Centre, Edinburgh. The items for discussion would include: UKRI collective talent; Artificial Intelligence; Horizon Scanning – forward look and industrial strategy; the Funding Service.

15. Rolling programme of business (NERC 25/30)

- 15.1 Helen Page reminded Council that topics for discussion at future meetings might be submitted to her at any point.

16. Any Other Business (Oral)

- 16.1 There was no further business.