



Natural
Environment
Research Council

Minutes of the 31st meeting of NERC Council in UK Research and Innovation

NATURAL ENVIRONMENT RESEARCH COUNCIL

Thirty-first meeting of NERC Council in UK Research and Innovation held at Caxton House, London on Thursday, 4 December 2025.

Members present:

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

Observers:

Christine Foster (part), NERC Non-Executive Director, Professor David Hannah, Chair, NERC Science Committee, Professor Anjali Goswami, CSA, Defra, Professor Emily Shuckburgh, CSA, DESNZ (part)

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

Apologies: Nick Folland, Kim Shillinglaw

Other attendees: Professor Sir Ian Chapman (item 2), Dr Liam Haydon, (items 4 and 8, via Teams), Jenny Hill (item 9), Professor Anne Ferguson-Smith (item 10), Dr Sarah Turner (items 11 and 12)

Secretariat: Helen Page, Katrina Lewis

Introductory items

1. Executive Chair's welcome, unconfirmed minutes of the 31st meeting of NERC Council and Action Log (NERC 25/31, NERC 25/32)

- 1.1 Louise Heathwaite welcomed members to the thirty-first 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 Gideon Henderson to his first meeting since assuming the role of Senior Independent Member.
- 1.3 Louise Heathwaite advised Council that this would be the last meeting for both Clare Matterson and David Hannah and thanked them for their valuable contributions to NERC. She added that Professor Alistair Lewis, University of York, would join in January as the new Chair, Science and Innovation Advisory Committee.

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- 1.4 Louise Heathwaite reminded members to advise Helen Page of any updates to their Declaration of Interests.
- 1.5 Louise Heathwaite asked if there were any vested interests in any of the items being discussed today. None were declared.
- 1.6 Louise Heathwaite asked members for any amendments and matters arising from the minutes of the previous meeting. No amendments were made, and the minutes of the thirtieth meeting were confirmed as an accurate record.

2. Professor Sir Ian Chapman (Oral)

- 2.1 Louise Heathwaite welcomed Ian Chapman to his first NERC Council meeting since assuming his role as UKRI CEO in August 2025.
- 2.2 Ian Chapman outlined his three principal areas of focus since joining UKRI:
 - mission, purpose and strategy
 - organisational and operational efficiency
 - external stakeholder engagement
- 2.3 Ian Chapman commented that it was important for UKRI to have both clarity of mission and purpose, informing Council that the mission for UKRI had now been refreshed: advancing knowledge, improving lives and driving growth. He emphasised that UKRI's primary customer was the UK public with universities acting as delivery partners. He added that Ministerial support for curiosity-driven research remained strong; however, UKRI must also demonstrably deliver against Government priorities and show clear impact on the economy and people's lives.
- 2.4 Ian Chapman informed Council that further details on the budget allocation would be published in the allocations explainer and that UKRI would have a renewed focus on ensuring its investments were delivering the intended outcomes. He added that, whilst the budget allocation for curiosity driven research would continue to be managed within the research councils, Executive Chair Responsible Owners (ROs) had been appointed to lead delivery against each of the eight industrial strategy sectors and the ROs would be accountable and responsible for decision making on portfolios of activity to deliver these across UKRI. Ian Chapman emphasised that choices would be required to ensure that the focus in future was on concentrating on the areas where the UK has comparative strength.
- 2.5 Ian Chapman noted that there was currently a lack of clarity around delegations, decision-making, and accountability at UKRI and acknowledged that UKRI had historically focused on inputs rather than outputs. He added that, in future, delivery and measurable outcomes must be central, with clear articulation of what UKRI's investments are delivering.
- 2.6 In discussion, Council members raised the following points:
 - the difficulty of measuring impact, particularly from curiosity driven research
 - the need to address bureaucracy within UKRI and how to ensure process serves purpose
 - the increasing rate of grant applications received and how to address this
 - how UKRI might support increased commercialisation whilst acknowledging the importance of differentiating between the role of the public and private sector
 - that research leading to cost avoidance or loss prevention (e.g. research in adaptation and resilience) also drives growth
 - the need to ensure that collaborative programmes involving large consortia only involved partners who added value
 - harmonisation of data collection
 - UKRI's risk appetite in funding decisions and how that might be increased

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- 2.7 Ian Chapman welcomed the comments from Council and thanked members for their contributions. He acknowledged the scale of the challenge and that he would continue to welcome Council advice on key areas of reform, encouraging Council to be inventive and unconstrained by historical ways of working.

3. Executive Chair's Update (Oral)

- 3.1 Louise Heathwaite commented that the UKRI allocation explainer would be published in the next few weeks adding that the intention was to call an extraordinary meeting of NERC Council prior to the March Council meeting to discuss the allocation in more detail.
- 3.2 Louise Heathwaite explained that the allocation to UKRI from DSIT of £38.6 billion from 2026-2030 would focus on three priority areas: curiosity-driven research; addressing industrial strategy growth sectors and wider Government priorities; supporting innovative, UK-based companies to scale-up and growth. She added that there was a '4th enabling platform bucket' covering areas such as talent and skills, infrastructure and centres/institutes.
- 3.3 Louise Heathwaite informed Council that, to support the Industrial Strategy, UKRI had allocated Executive Chair Responsible Owners (ROs) to lead the following cross-UKRI programmes:
- Advanced Manufacturing, Tom Adeyoola, Innovate UK
 - Agritech, Anne Ferguson-Smith, BBSRC
 - Clean Growth and Energy, Louise Heathwaite, NERC
 - Creative Industries, Christopher Smith, AHRC
 - National Security and Defence, Charlotte Deane, EPSRC
 - Engineering Biology, Anne Ferguson-Smith, BBSRC
 - Artificial Intelligence, Charlotte Deane, EPSRC
 - Quantum Technologies, Charlotte Deane, EPSRC
 - Advanced Connectivity Technologies, Semiconductors and Cybersecurity, Charlotte Deane, EPSRC
 - Financial Services and Professional & Business Services, Stian Westlake, ESRC
 - Life Sciences, Patrick Chinnery, MRC
 - Space, Michele Dougherty, STFC
- 3.4 Louise Heathwaite commented that new ways of working would be required to deliver these programmes which would require collaborative work across the councils. Council asked whether it would have opportunity to advise on, for example, assessment of funding/peer review and changes to UKRI funding mechanisms and it was confirmed that this would be needed.
- 3.5 Council highlighted the importance of demonstrating the contribution which environmental science makes and Louise Heathwaite agreed that NERC needed to better articulate how it generated growth and suggested that the Executive Chair, Innovate UK be invited to a future Council meeting.
- Action: Innovate UK Executive Chair to be invited to join a NERC Council meeting**
- 3.6 Council noted that NERC would have opportunities within the other sectors of the Industrial Strategy and asked whether this was being considered which was confirmed. Louise Heathwaite suggested that the other ROs might be invited to future NERC Council meetings to explore opportunities to work together.

4. UKRI Allocations (Oral)

- 4.1 Kate Hamer introduced this item. Liam Haydon observed this item.

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- 4.2 Kate Hamer informed Council that the refreshed UKRI-DSIT Framework Document had recently been published, adding that this was the first update to the framework document since the formation of UKRI in 2018. The document includes the responsibilities of Council and it was agreed that a link to the Framework would be circulated to members.

Action: Circulate a link to the UKRI-DSIT Framework agreement

- 4.3 Kate Hamer advised Council that UKRI had also published its Corporate Plan 2025/26 which included a range of Objectives and Key Results (OKRs). She added that a new UKRI Strategy document would be published in spring 2026.
- 4.4 Kate Hamer informed Council that the research centres were part of the National Research Organisations group and this was helping to understand what they collectively delivered for the UK and how they supported delivery for both the government and UKRI. She added that a governance review of the centres was underway to ensure it was appropriate under the new allocations model.
- 4.5 Council asked about the ownership of the data generated by the centres.). Iain Williams confirmed that there were policies on data at both UKRI and NERC level. Louise Heathwaite added that it would be important to consider data as an asset as it was currently undervalued and undermarketed.

5. NERC Council Senior Independent Member: Introduction (Oral)

- 5.1 Gideon Henderson provided some introductory remarks since assuming the role of Senior Independent Member in October. He commented that he was keen to ensure that better use was made of Council members time, emphasising the important role Council has to play in advising the NERC Executive Chair and Executive Team.
- 5.2 Gideon Henderson asked Council members for their engagement in ensuring topics of relevance are discussed at future meetings, for example, ideas for new funding models across UKRI and data management and use which were both topics on which Council had considerable expertise.
- 5.3 Gideon Henderson commented that the intention was to involve Council at an earlier stage in the decision-making process in future, noting that this would mean potentially more sensitive information would be shared. He reiterated the importance of members treating both Council papers and discussions as confidential and not for further discussion outside of Council meetings.

6. NERC Director updates (Oral) *Slides, item 6*

- 6.1 Louise Heathwaite introduced this item and reminded Council that the intention was to provide updates from two Directors at each meeting.
- 6.2 Kate Hamer provided some background information on the roles she had held across UKRI which had included working within the UKRI Corporate Hub. She explained that her current role involved working closely with colleagues both in NERC and at UKRI, adding that her directorate was the first time that strategy, impact, insight and performance had been combined within one directorate.
- 6.3 Kate Hamer outlined her primary responsibilities within NERC, noting that she also worked closely with other councils on, for example, Building a Green Future and National Security and Defence and represented NERC on a range of standing boards across UKRI.
- 6.4 Michaela Simpson explained that she had two primary responsibilities: operational and organisational effectiveness and people and culture and outlined the range of

responsibilities within these.

- 6.5 Michaela Simpson explained that some of her key focus areas included leading people through change with clarity, accountability and kindness and ensuring NERC had the skills and capacity for its future organisational design.

7. Introduction to Chief Scientific Adviser, DESNZ (Oral)

- 7.1 Emily Shuckburgh, the newly appointed CSA, DESNZ, provided a brief introduction, outlining her long standing association with environmental research. She noted that the research NERC funded was important to DESNZ particularly around climate science and net zero activity.

Items for discussion

8. Joint session with EPSRC Council, March 2026 (NERC 25/33)

- 8.1 Louise Heathwaite introduced this item and explained that NERC was keen to work more closely with EPSRC, noting that there were shared interests in both AI and defence. The joint session planned for March 2026 would provide an opportunity to explore areas where the two councils might work together and ideas discussed today would feed into the planning.
- 8.2 Kate Hamer reminded Council that two joint meetings, with MRC and BBSRC, had been held previously and that these had led to joint funding opportunities. She suggested some areas for potential discussion at the joint session: looking at one of the Industrial Strategy sectors; autonomy; talent and skills; place; commercialisation and invited further ideas from Council.
- 8.3 In discussion, the following suggestions were made:
- consideration of the current overlap in both communities
 - autonomous marine – advanced manufacturing – offshore wind – broader than marine autonomy
 - the importance of ensuring the right people attend (ie. it is not too high level)
 - digital/data
 - skills development/talent for the future
 - renewables, circular economy, Carbon Capture and Storage (CCS)
 - adaptation
 - research interest in Sizewell C
 - hydrogen and the role it will play in energy solutions
 - digital technology and ensuring data is accessible and useable
 - forever chemicals
 - flooding – NERC/EP programme
 - autonomous sensing and machine learning
- 8.4 David Hannah commented that Science Committee had been considering how best to work cross-council on strategic investments and had identified opportunities in a wide range of areas including: defence and security (including cyber security); advanced manufacturing; food production and vertical farming; growth of low power devices and clean energy.

[Christine Foster left the meeting].

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9. R&D Missions Accelerator Programme (RDMAP): Clean Energy Superpower Mission (Oral) Slides, item 9

- 9.1 Louise Heathwaite introduced this item and explained that RDMAP was a DSIT programme which UKRI managed. She added that she was the lead for the Clean Energy element of RDMAP and Jenny Hill was the Clean Energy Challenge Director.
- 9.2 Jenny Hill explained that this was a £500 million programme up to 2030 with an expectation of leveraging further investment from industry. She explained that R&D MAP would work differently in that it would be: problem-driven; leveraging co-investment from industry; have accelerated impact and would be agile and adaptive.
- 9.3 Jenny Hill informed Council that the long-term government mission was to make Britain clean energy Superpower by 2030. She outlined the three focus areas determined by the three problem statement areas:
- consumer led flexibility
 - long duration energy storage
 - supply side flexibility through Low Carbon Dispatchable Power
- 9.4 In discussion, Council highlighted the importance of focusing on policy or behavioural changes and the need to take a systemic view and not just short-term solutions.
- 9.5 Jenny Hill commented that there were multiple business models and mechanisms to consider, acknowledging that the energy space was complex and that it would be important to communicate, to innovators, a vision of what the system might look like in 2030 to maximise the opportunities.
- 9.6 Council noted the importance of private leverage adding that providing the evidence, as displayed on the slide, of the excess energy being produced would help with this. Jenny Hill commented that engagement with data centres was already being considered.
- 9.7 Council asked whether the areas under Low Carbon Dispatchable Power such as geothermal; biomass energy; modular, nuclear, CCS were in scope for the programme, noting that other areas such as liquid biofuels and city fuels might be out of scope. Jenny Hill confirmed that the areas in scope were currently being identified from a broad range of options.

10. BBSRC Forward Look: Professor Anne Ferguson-Smith (Oral) Slides, item 10

- 10.1 Professor Louise Heathwaite welcomed Anne Ferguson-Smith, BBSRC Executive Chair, to NERC Council.
- 10.2 Anne Ferguson-Smith explained that the joint BBSRC/NERC Council workshop held in September 2024 had highlighted a huge amount of synergy between the two research councils.
- 10.3 Anne Ferguson-Smith highlighted the alignment of the BBSRC Forward Look, published in summer 2025, with the new mission for UKRI. She added that the BBSRC vision, articulated within the Forward Look, was to *harness the power of bioscience to deliver a healthy, sustainable and resilient future*.
- 10.4 Anne Ferguson-Smith outlined the three priority areas for BBSRC which included: sustainable agriculture and food systems; healthy people, animals and plants; a resilient bioeconomy. She acknowledged the importance of working in partnership with industry, external stakeholders and across UKRI, and noted the important role played by the BBSRC

institutes.

10.5 Anne Ferguson-Smith informed Council that the National Engineering Biology Programme provided an effective example of a cross-council programme which provided engineering biology for: food systems; biomedicine; clean growth and environmental solutions.

10.6 Council highlighted the overlap between BBSRC and NERC priorities as evidenced by the recently published report by BBSRC's biodiversity expert working group and it was agreed to circulate a link to the report to members.

Action: link to the BBSRC report to be circulated

11. Science Committee update (NERC 25/34)

11.1 David Hannah introduced this item to inform Council of key matters discussed at the 24th meeting of NERC Science Committee. Sarah Turner observed this item.

11.2 David Hannah informed Council that Science Committee had last met on 14-15 October. Topics for discussion had included: annual review of activity; talent and skills; environmental technology and embedding technology; cultural resistance – alignment with advances ie in AI; improvements in internal processes that might be needed; SRI Horizon Scanning workshop; Forward look and growth agenda.

11.3 David Hannah advised Council that the next meeting of Science Committee would take place on 22 January in London. The items for discussion would include: self-assessment; horizon scanning/frontiers programme.

11.4 David Hannah expressed his thanks, as this was his last meeting as the Chair of Science Committee, and to the members and Executive for their support. He also expressed his thanks to those in NERC who he had worked closely with over the years including Gemma Davies, Sarah Turner, Iain Williams, Susan Waldron and Tracy Shimmield.

11.5 Gideon Henderson asked whether there were opportunities to work with other councils on ice-free arctic and David Hannah agreed that there were. Louise Heathwaite commented that Rupert Lewis and Kate Hamer had responsibility for geopolitics and international working and this was also an area EPSRC were interested in.

12 Science Committee: Transition to Science and Innovation Advisory Committee (Oral)

12.1 Rupert Lewis introduced this item and Sarah Turner observed.

12.2 Rupert Lewis commented on the current pace of change across the organisation and the importance of ensuring the Executive received the breadth of advice required for effective decision making. He added that it had been decided to refocus the current Science Committee and transition it to a Science and Innovation Advisory Committee from January 2026. He added that future member recruitment would seek to bring in different skills particularly in innovation.

12.3 Anjali Goswami emphasised the importance of NERC demonstrating its unique contribution to growth. Rupert Lewis confirmed that it remained important to continue to explain the beneficial outcomes from environmental research.

13 NERC Council Finance Report (NERC 25/35)

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

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13.2 Wendy Selby-Brown informed Council that NERC, British Antarctic Survey (BAS) and British Geological Survey (BGS) were expected to forecast a balanced position by the end of the financial year, adding that BAS and BGS were being monitored closely. She explained that the challenges in making payments to suppliers caused by the introduction of the new Oracle Fusion system were resolved with regular meetings held to ensure this remained on track.

13.3 Wendy-Selby Brown added that targets related to Operational Expenditure would be met, adding that BAS and BGS remained under a recruitment freeze.

13.4 Louise Heathwaite thanked Wendy Selby-Brown for her efforts, adding that reporting for 2026/27 financial year would look very different under the new allocations.

14 NERC Council Quarterly Risk Review (NERC 25/36)

14.1 Kim Bond introduced this item, advising Council that the objective risks had now been reduced to seven following Council feedback in September. She added that each objective risk was owned by a member of the Executive Team with the objective risk registers being refined over time.

14.2 Kim Bond explained that there were no changes to the top risks currently, noting that the allocations might bring further changes.

14.3 Kim Bond informed Council that the IGRAF exercise would commence in the new year which would also help to identify potential gaps.

14.4 Kim Bond informed Council that there was a current focus on security across UKRI, adding that a paper on security was scheduled to be discussed at March Council.

14.5 Council asked how risks which were outside of risk appetite would be managed. Kim Bond explained that, as part of the transition to objective based risks, these will be reviewed. She added that, as part of this, some work was needed to improve the process which would include improving the escalation process and seeking to mitigate risks at a lower level which would require a cultural change in considering risk management across the organisation.

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

15.1 Anjali Goswami provided an update under the following headings:

- Governmental change including recent appointments
- Environmental Improvement Plans
- COP30, Brazil
- Resilience, Economy, Security through Ecosystem Transitions (RESET)
- Strategic Monitoring Review at Defra
- Pollution

15.2 Council asked whether the recent Climate National Emergency Briefing had been a success. Anjali Goswami responded that it had been well attended and presentations had been good and data rich.

16. NERC Assurance Board: minutes (NERC 25/37)

16.1 Gideon Henderson introduced this item explaining that he had attended as an observer prior to assuming the role of Chair, NERC Assurance Board at the next meeting scheduled in February.

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16.2 Gideon Henderson informed Council that some of the topics under discussion at the meeting had included: the future of the airbridge to Antarctica; aviation assurance; risk management process; overview of assurance and risk and assurance at the research centres.

16.3 Gideon Henderson explained that UKRI had an Audit, Risk, and Assurance Committee (ARAC) which had responsibility for generic issues but, as NERC had specific risks related to aircraft, ships and remote working a separate board had been established. He added that an Aviation Assurance Panel was now in place with a Maritime Assurance Panel also being established so it may be that the NERC Assurance Board was no longer required and this was under consideration as part of the governance review within NERC.

17. Rolling programme of business (NERC 25/38)

17.1 Helen Page reminded Council that topics for discussion at future meetings might be submitted to her at any point, noting Gideon's earlier request for Council input.

18. Any Other Business (Oral)

18.1 There was no further business.