



**Natural
Environment
Research Council**

NERC Science Committee 20th Meeting

Summary of Discussion

3 July 2024, via zoom.

Members Present: Professor David Hannah (Chair), Professor Nicola Beaumont, Professor Michael Bentley, Professor Jane Hill, Professor Anna Hogg, Professor Ian Main, Professor Andrew Manning, Professor Dan Parsons, Professor Daniela Schmidt, Professor Marian Scott, Professor David Topping and Dr Glenn Watts and Professor Helen Williams

Ex-Officio: Dr Tracy Shimmield (Interim NERC Director, Research and Skills),

Apologies: None

Other NERC Attendees: Whole meeting: Dr Sarah Turner (NERC Associate Director, Strategic Programme Generation & Delivery (SPG&D). Iain Williams (NERC Director, Strategic Partnerships). **Item 4:** Mike Webb (NERC Head of Research: Marine), Simon Gardner (NERC Head of Research: Digital Environment), Simon Kerley (NERC Head of Research: Terrestrial, Health & Freshwater) and Daniel Knight (NERC Senior Programme Manager). **Item 5:** Liesbeth Renders (Associate Director Discovery & Highlight Science, Talent and Skills), Matt Viner (Senior Insights and Analysis Manager) and Mary Goodchild (NERC Associate Director, Governance and Funding Operations). **Item 6:** Alison Robinson (Deputy Executive Chair). **Item 7:** Chloe Somers (NERC Associate Director, Research Capital & Place), Oliver Knevitt (NERC Head of Research: Capital & Place) and Jess Willow (NERC Senior Programme Manager, Research Capital & Place) **Items 8:** Thomas Haynes (NERC Associate Director, National Capability).

Secretary: Gemma Davies

Key issues discussed

NERC Financial Forecast

The committee noted the NERC core budget for 2024/25, for all funding lines, noting that future years are not available due to the end of our current Spending Review allocation end March 2025 and the anticipated autumn Spending Review which will determine future UKRI / NERC allocations.

Science Committee sought clarification on the following points: over commitment/spend, The Funding Service's (TFS) inability to make awards resulting in delays to project payments and start dates, the budget line for Copernicus and the UKRI strategic Theme allocations. It was noted that Science Committee could help steer priorities where the maximum environmental science benefits can be delivered in relation to UKRI themes.

Strategic Research Investment to achieve [NERC Delivery Plan](#) Ambitions

The committee were informed that 3 of the 7 cases prioritised at the last meeting were brought back as mature cases to be reviewed by Science Committee, and that the other 4 cases were being worked up on a slower timeline. The committee advised on where the programme design could be strengthened to elicit science excellence & impact through timely outcomes. The ideas were ranked in order of their potential to meet delivery plan ambitions for consideration by Council.

Diversity in the environmental science community

The committee reviewed and shared insights into potential causes behind the high-level assessment of the eligible NERC community in Higher Education Institutes (HEIs) and advised where NERC effort would be best targeted to bring about greater equity in our funding outcomes.

During discussion Science Committee asked if The Funding Service (TFS) could gather some more granular data, for example first generation academics as it would be useful to understand some of the barriers people face in their career. It would also be useful if all doctoral training entities could provide consistent data from applicants to awardees. Science Committee advised to move beyond statistics to include more qualitative data.

Executive Chair update

Alison Robinson (Deputy Exec-Chair) provided this update. Alison noted it was a time of change and updated the committee on financial constraints, the importance of partnerships, (e.g., Building a Green Future), head count controls, The Funding Service, how environmental science contributes to prosperity, and the new environmental sustainability concordat, which will help consistent data reporting. Alison also informed the committee that UKRI are going to start setting carbon budgets and updated them on NERC's plan to reach net zero by 2040. Alison also noted that Science Committee would be asked for advice on the forthcoming NERC Forward Look.

Infrastructure Pipeline

The committee noted the approach being taken to review NERC's infrastructure portfolio and identify future priorities and advised on the challenges and opportunities in developing a balanced portfolio that meets the UKRI Roadmap Environment ambitions. The committee also advised on the composition of the proposed Working Group to advise NERC on priority areas for infrastructure investment.

National Capability (NC) Overview and Portfolio

Tom Haynes (NERC Associate Director, National Capability) gave the committee an overview of National Capability funding and science. Science Committee noted NC's science programme investments and upcoming key dates of NC reviews and the Science Committee's role in these reviews.

Feedback from March and June Council Meetings

The Chair noted that 2 Council meetings had taken place since the last Science Committee meeting and that Louise Heathwaite (NERC Executive Chair) commenced on the 11 March 2024 and she will take on the role of Sustainability Champion for UKRI from September.

The Chair noted that the Council Retreat discussions were a springboard for the horizon scanning work that Science Committee could do for the Forward Look.

The Chair noted that the Chief Executive was keen to understand better the outcomes of funding and that Science Committee has an important role to play in terms of evaluating and advising on NERC's future priorities. It was also noted that not all science should have an immediate and mappable impact, as some of the best science does not have immediately realise impact.

Standing items

The Committee confirmed the minutes and noted council feedback, the information papers, and the forward agenda.