

Future Leaders Council (FLC) Annual Report 2023-24

Executive Summary

The FLC have had a successful and productive first year, drawing on their combined expertise, diverse viewpoints, and community representation, to provide valuable and informative advice and challenge to NERC. The FLC would like to highlight the following points to NERC Council:

- The training and development opportunities provided by NERC have been helpful and useful and they have found the visits and tours of the Research Centres particularly illuminating and beneficial.
- Of their four areas of specific responsibility, members feel they have provided effective challenge, advice, and recommendations, on three areas: NERC's net zero pathway; the Diversity & Inclusion funding line; and NERC's Public Engagement strategy. Of the fourth responsibility – NERC's digital strategy and approaches – members believe they could have been more effective advising on this if they were engaged earlier, to enable more opportunity to shape and influence NERC's approach.
- As part of the FLC Annual Self Assessment, members have advised the NERC Executive of several ways their working could be improved, including communications between meetings and shorter presentations from the NERC Executive to enable longer discussion.
- Next year, the FLC wish to remain engaged on all four areas of responsibility currently assigned to them, as well monitoring progress and delivery of NERC's biodiversity action plan, and any other areas NERC Council wish to assign to them.

Introduction

Purpose of the FLC

1. The [NERC Future Leaders Council](#) (FLC) was established in 2023. Its purpose is to provide members with a development opportunity to gain first-hand experience of the workings and dynamics of a senior board, and enable them to become future NERC Council or committee members or join boards of other organisations. Members were selected from a diverse range of backgrounds and at different career stages, to ensure NERC becomes more representative of the communities it serves, and that NERC benefits from constructive challenge from a wider range of perspectives.

Recruitment and training

2. Members of the FLC were recruited through an open, fair, and transparent recruitment process as individuals with expertise. This could have been from lived experience and/or through professional knowledge established through engagement with communities of interest or a relevant subject matter.
3. As part of the induction process, in early May 2023, FLC members underwent formal governance training alongside new members of NERC Council. Later that month, FLC

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members met with the NERC Executive Chair to discuss in detail the purpose of the FLC and ask questions. They also met with a member of NERC Council to learn more about the role and responsibilities of Council. They were provided with an introduction to each of the topics they had been assigned specific responsibility for, and discussed their vision for the FLC and how they would like to work.

4. At their first meeting in June 2023, FLC members discussed what their needs were with regards to mentoring and training. Members agreed they would prefer interactive community-based mentoring via tours and sessions with staff or other NERC board members. It was agreed NERC would provide a facilitated action learning set, and part of this was delivered alongside a tour of NOC ahead of the second FLC meeting. The action learning set included a facilitated group coaching session to explore the following question: "What skills and knowledge would enable me to be a more effective member of the NERC Future Leader's council?" This was followed up with an informal meeting with the FLC Chair to discuss actions that could be put in place to assist with the personal development of FLC members.

FLC meetings

5. The FLC meet twice a year. Their first meeting took place on 14 June 2023 at the [National Centre for Earth Observation \(NCEO\)](#), and their second meeting was on 22 November 2023 at the [National Oceanography Centre \(NOC\)](#). The third meeting took place on 5 June 2024 at the [British Antarctic Survey \(BAS\)](#). (N.B. Outputs from the third meeting are not captured in this report, as they will be included in the 2024-25 Annual Report.)

Interactions between the FLC and NERC Council

6. To date, the Chair of the FLC has attended NERC Council meetings in June 2023, September 2023, December 2023 and March 2024. The whole of the FLC will attend the NERC Council retreat in June 2024.

Objectives of the FLC

7. The Future Leaders Council is a sub-committee of NERC Council. The NERC Executive Chair, on behalf of NERC Council, has delegated authority to the NERC Future Leaders Council for three main areas of responsibility:
 - i. Reviewing and advising on specific papers that go to NERC Council to bring in more perspectives.
 - ii. Providing a body for consultation related to the development or clarification of policy, where NERC Council has agreed or required a consultation.
 - iii. Specific responsibilities delegated by NERC Council. In 2023-24 these were:
 - a. Oversight of the development and implementation of the [NERC net zero](#) pathway.
 - b. Advice on the implementation of the [NERC digital strategy](#) and use of digital approaches across NERC's portfolio.
 - c. Funding governance of the Diversity & Inclusion (D&I) funding line of £1.5m under the Strategic Research & Innovation budget. Including spend for diversity and inclusion enrichment activity and recommendations on programme spend to the NERC Executive.
 - d. Provide challenge and oversight of plans for delivery against the current [NERC Public Engagement strategy](#) and development of future PE strategies.

Actions taken by the FLC

8. To date NERC Council have not requested the FLC advise on any specific papers for Council, nor consult on any policy development or clarification. The focus of the FLC in its first year has therefore been on the four other specific responsibilities delegated by NERC Council.

NERC net zero pathway

9. In June 2023, the FLC discussed the trials of low carbon fuels. They recommended communicating about the trials both internally and externally. They also recommended NERC use an evidence-based communication indicating where a fuel had been purchased and derived from, followed by a review from an external panel on success of the trials. They advised there would need to be thought on how this would be communicated if the trials failed. The FLC highlighted a potential risk that people could become aware of NERC's high carbon footprint following communications about fuel, and NERC may need to tell a wider story on its decarbonisation pathway.
10. Acting on the advice of the FLC, NERC published details of the low carbon fuel trials on the UKRI website: [Low-carbon fuel trials on NERC research vessels – UKRI](#) and received positive feedback from several organisations about this work.
11. In November 2023, the FLC discussed NERC's approach to, and target of, estate decarbonisation by 2030. The FLC agreed that 2030 was a sensible target and noted the plans in place to achieve this. Members advised of the importance of stage-gates to review and ensure NERC remained on target before 2030.

Digital strategy and digital approaches

12. In November 2023, the FLC reviewed the implementation of NERC's digital strategy and use of digital approaches across NERC's portfolio. The FLC gave a variety of feedback and suggestions, for NERC to review and select the most important themes to discuss in the future. The feedback included: conduct a digital maturity analysis across organisations; support people to enable them to make use of AI developments and provide training opportunities; allow time for older generations to adapt to AI integration, but accept some members of the community will never adopt new technologies; provide shorter fellowships open to everyone; show what the partnership will bring for all parties; note there is a vacuum of clear leadership in this field; consider AI interaction with net zero for UKRI.

Diversity & Inclusion funding line

13. In June 2023, the FLC discussed the NERC Diversity & Inclusion (D&I) £1.5m annual funding line. As a starting point, the FLC agreed a second year of funding for NERC Research Centres and Changing the Environment (CtE) awardees to deliver specific projects that could demonstrate would be effective in supporting bringing new talent to or enhancing how environmental science was delivered. Projects included apprenticeships, inclusive recruitment training, to dedicated spaces and facilities with a specific requirement from the FLC for more collaborative working between awardees. During this second year of funding projects include STEM clubs, community outreach, internships and a retreat this Autumn for funding recipients to share learning consider how D&I can be embedded into research
14. Also in June 2023, the FLC agreed to scoping a role modelling investment for commitment in financial years 2025/26 – 2027/28, and requested a sub-group was established to develop the scheme. The FLC agreed a proposed budget after reviewing the future spend for the funding line. The sub-group met in February 2024 and reported to the FLC meeting in June 2024. At their June 2024 meeting the FLC approved a funding call that sets out how NERC will provide funding to successful applicants to support a cohort of partnerships to increase the potential

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talent pool attracted to and retained in the field. Following discussion at the FLC a bursary stage and cohort support and coordination package is being developed as part of the call offer which will include in person and virtual 'town hall' events. The call aims to see a diverse a broad range of leaders in environmental science working together to lead the most innovative research possible for the advancement of the sector.

15. The FLC requested they were involved earlier in future phases for D&I funding and would like to review a wider variety of benchmarking data, not just data for HEIs. A possible session either at a future meeting of the FLC or as part of the NERC Council retreat was suggested.

Current and future Public Engagement strategies

16. In November 2023, the FLC discussed the NERC Public Engagement strategy and its implementation. The FLC highlighted the importance of being clear about what was meant by public engagement (in comparison to e.g., science communication). The FLC agreed it would be useful to have more time to explore this distinction and offer wider thoughts and steers to inform a public engagement approach. The FLC agreed to be involved in developing a strategy with partners, new and existing, and NERC would look at options for a wider ranging discussion to allow that input.
17. The FLC asked for a clearer definition of the Diversity and Inclusion funding line to ensure a clear remit and purpose for each funding line. The FLC agreed that there may be areas where the funding lines might overlap, and asked NERC to monitor this and flag to the FLC when this may arise so it could be actively considered.

Conclusions of the FLC

Effectiveness

18. The FLC Annual Self Assessment highlighted that FLC meetings contained a good quality of discussion and members felt they had been particularly effective in providing challenge and oversight of NERC's Public Engagement (PE) strategy and the development of future PE strategies, and in acting as advocates for NERC within their own communities and beyond. The FLC felt their effectiveness with regards to advising on the implementation of NERC's digital strategy and use of digital approaches across the NERC portfolio could be improved - primarily through earlier engagement - as could their relationship with NERC Council and the NERC Executive.
19. More generally, the topics the FLC have discussed have given members exposure to NERC's real-world challenges and an understanding of the complexities involved in any given scenario. This has provided the FLC with valuable experience and an awareness of the types of issues NERC Council need to analyse and incorporate into decision making.
20. The diversity in the background and career stage of FLC members has enabled them to use a forward-thinking approach, incorporating wider perspectives and visionary thinking into their advice and recommendations. This has provided NERC with a better understanding of how its communities might view and respond to new proposals and initiatives, and enabled NERC to make opportunities more accessible, understandable, and applicable to a wider pool of potential applicants.
21. The mutual benefits arising from the FLC for members and NERC demonstrates an effective and successful first year.

Enablers and barriers

22. NERC have provided the FLC with a lot of information to digest and consider at their meetings. To enable and facilitate discussions, the FLC have requested shorter presentations from NERC to allow more time for discussion and feedback from members. They have also

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identified the potential need to improve the structure of future meetings, and requested NERC provide clearer definitions of the ask for each discussion topic. To enable better communication and information sharing between meetings, the option of a team site for sharing information is being explored.

Programme for next year/ forward look

23. The areas of specific responsibility assigned to the FLC in 2023-24 are not yet concluded, and the FLC are keen to continue advising and overseeing these areas. In particular, the FLC would like to:
 - i. be kept abreast of NERC's progress on the net zero pathway, and potentially be involved in stage-gate reviews to ensure NERC remains on target
 - ii. partake in further discussions around key themes regarding new digital approaches
 - iii. be involved in future phases of D&I funding and review a wider variety of benchmarking data, and further develop the role modelling scheme - supported by the FLC sub-group
 - iv. advise NERC on developing a Public Engagement strategy with partners, new and existing.
24. In addition to the above, in 2024-25 NERC Council have requested the FLC set a biodiversity target for the NERC estate, in support of NERC's biodiversity action plan. As well as setting a target, the FLC propose they are involved in monitoring progress towards meeting the target and delivery of the action plan.
25. As per their Terms of Reference, the FLC will also review and advise on any specific papers that go to NERC Council to bring in more perspectives, and provide a body for consultation related to the development or clarification of policy, where NERC Council has agreed or required a consultation.

Appendix

Future Leaders Council: photographs and quotes

Appendix

Future Leaders Council: photographs and quotes



Image above: FLC members on a tour of the National Oceanography Centre (November 2023)

“I’m extremely proud to be working along side such a diverse and talented group of council members. I greatly enjoy helping to leverage their expertise and perspectives, so that collectively we can advise and challenge NERC Council, while broadening the scope of ideas and approaches surrounding UK environmental research and innovation”

Charlie McNichol-Fardon,
FLC Chair

Image right and below: FLC members partaking in a facilitated group coaching session (November 2023)

