Research Leadership Symposia 2025 Final Evaluation Report

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1. Executive Summary

The UKRI Strategic Research Leadership Symposia pilot, delivered by the Future Leaders Fellows Development Network (FLFDN), provided a highly valued leadership development opportunity for senior research leaders across UKRI's funded landscape.

Structured around two in-person residential Leadership Labs (York, January 2025; London, March 2025) and supported by an innovative mentoring challenge, the programme successfully brought together 49 participants from across research disciplines and institutional types. The Symposia created a collaborative space for exploring leadership challenges, sharing best practices, and building lasting cross-disciplinary networks.

Evaluation data indicate strong participant satisfaction, with Net Promoter Scores reaching 100% and high approval ratings across key performance indicators (4.3–4.7 out of 5). Participants valued the balance of reflection, peer-learning, and leadership skill development, citing increased confidence, expanded networks, and tangible impacts on their leadership practices and strategic decision-making. Engagement levels were particularly high for the in-person events, underscoring the importance of protected time and immersive environments.

The mentoring challenge, while variably taken up, was positively received by those who engaged, providing opportunities for richer collaboration between research and innovation leaders, and operational and professional services leaders.

Qualitative feedback suggests that the programme successfully fostered a strong peer network, broadened participants' perspectives on leadership, and inspired actionable changes within institutions. Unexpected outcomes included new collaborations, enhanced mentoring practices, and greater focus on leadership legacy planning.

Looking ahead, participants expressed strong support for the continuation of the programme, with a preference for annual residential events, greater participant co-design, and expanded international engagement opportunities.

The Symposia model demonstrated significant value for both individual leadership development and broader system-level leadership capacity building. Based on this evaluation, four key recommendations are made:

- Embed structured leadership development pathways for senior UKRI-funded leaders.
- Enhance diversity in future cohorts through more targeted outreach.
- Strengthen mentoring and peer-support mechanisms.
- Enable co-creation of future programme content to maintain relevance and participant ownership.

Overall, the Research Leadership Symposia pilot has laid the foundations for a sustainable, impactful leadership development initiative that supports UKRI's broader ambitions for research culture, innovation, and sectoral resilience.

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Evaluation Report

2. Introduction

The UKRI Strategic Research Leadership Symposia (£126.5K), funded by the UKRI People and Culture Change Board, was a pilot programme designed to strengthen leadership across the UK's research and innovation landscape. Focused on leadership development, peer learning, and expert mentoring, the Symposia brought senior research leaders together to explore the opportunities and challenges of large-scale, interdisciplinary work.

Offered to 317 UKRI-funded strategic investment leaders, the programme attracted 55 registrants (49 participants), forming a cross-council cohort from AHRC, BBSRC, EPSRC, ESRC, Innovate UK, MRC, STFC, and NERC. It created space for reflection, peer exchange, and confidence-building in areas where research leadership is often most complex.

Delivered by the Future Leaders Fellows Development Network (FLFDN), the programme centred on two Crucible-style Leadership Labs—held in York (January 2025) and London (March 2025)—facilitated by Dr Sara Shinton (FLFDN) and Samantha Aspinall (Horizons Institute, Leeds). The Labs featured high-profile speakers and peer-led exploration of themes such as sustainable financing, cross-sector collaboration, and innovative leadership. The overarching aim was to strengthen peer connections and establish the foundations for a lasting leadership support network, while enhancing participants' research leadership capacity through exposure to new thinking and the opportunity to reflect on and develop their own leadership practice.

The first Lab in York focused on building relationships, understanding influence, and driving institutional change. Participants shared challenges, discussed resilience, and refined influence strategies through facilitated workshops. A keynote from Professor Cath Noakes, a member of SAGE during the Covid-19 pandemic, explored the value of seizing unexpected leadership opportunities.

The second Lab in London focused on action and legacy. Discussions included the impact of mentoring and creating "space" through leadership. Speakers included Professor Dame Ottoline Leyser, reflecting on national research strategy, and Professor Kerry Hood on sustainable funding models. The event concluded with participant-led sessions on defining leadership legacies—an area of particular interest identified by the cohort.

In parallel, the programme introduced a mentoring challenge, designed by Dr Kay Guccione, to offer fresh perspectives through structured leadership conversations with colleagues from professional or operational services. Participants were encouraged to hold two cross-functional conversations, supported by guiding resources. The initiative aimed to promote more equitable, trusting, and collaborative research and innovation cultures.

The evaluation explores the programme's success, impact, and areas for improvement—focusing on leadership development, mentoring, and cross-disciplinary exchange. It reviews participant engagement, content relevance, and future delivery opportunities using both qualitative and quantitative data, informing the design of sustained leadership support.

3. Methodology

The evaluation combines quantitative and qualitative data collected before, during, and after the Symposia:

- **Pre-event Registration Data**: Collected via application forms to assess participant expectations. We received a 100% response rate, though response quality varied (Supplementary File A).
- **Attendance Data**: Tracks individual participation across both Leadership Labs and online forums (Supplementary File A).
- **Post-event Summaries:** Notes from structured discussions were synthesised into interim reports for UKRI, focusing on emerging themes and next steps for both participants and the funder (Appendix 2).
- **Post-event Survey:** Administered after the Symposia and included quantitative (Likert scale) and qualitative (open-text) questions on programme quality and leadership impact. We received 18 responses—around 30% of participants (Supplementary File B).

This evaluation draws primarily on self-reported survey feedback collected post-programme. We also include two one-page post-event summaries developed from on-the-day observations and informal participant comments. These offer qualitative context but are not presented as systematic observational data. All formal data sources are provided in the Appendices and Supplementary documentation.

We developed four indicators to benchmark the programme's impact:

a) Create a diverse cohort of peers
b) Foster peer-to-peer learning
c) Support participants' leadership development
d) Address the cohort's self-defined leadership needs

4. Participant Demographics

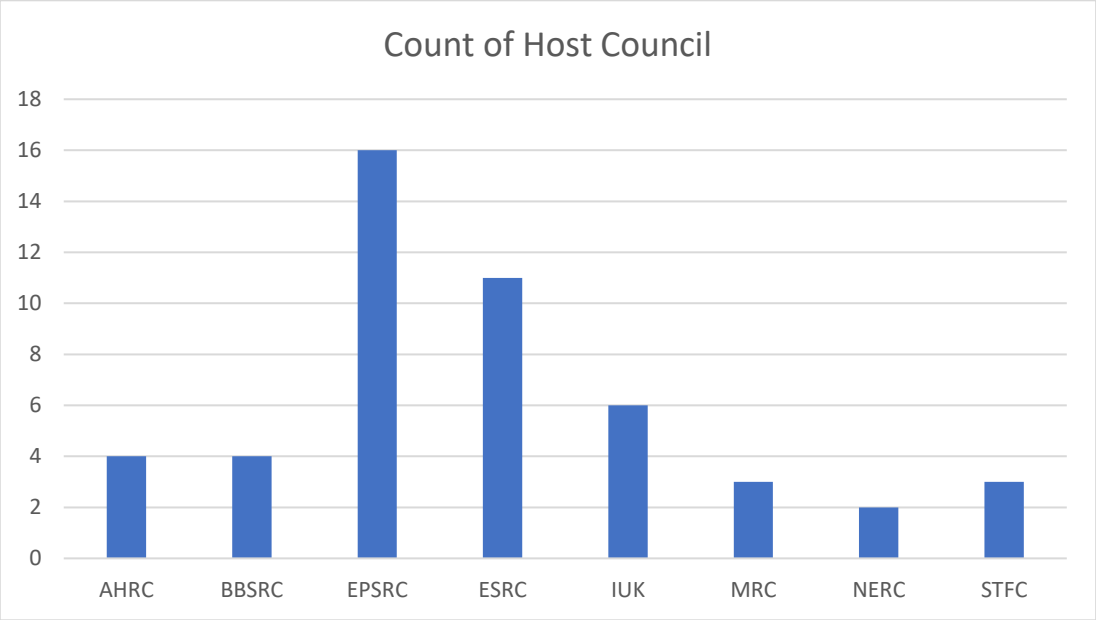
Of the 317 invitations to apply issued to UKRI-funded senior research leaders, FLFDN received 55 applications to the scheme. Of those that registered, six withdrew or were withdrawn prior to the first Symposia:

Participant 50	Time Constraints: Overseas in March
Participant 51	Time Constraints: Personal
Participant 52	Time Constraints: Other Meetings
Participant 53	No response to repeated messages
Participant 54	Time Constraints: Conflicting Event/ Presentation
Participant 55	Time Constraints: Teaching schedule

A. Personal Characteristics

Of the 49 active participants—defined as those who attended at least one symposium—the sex distribution was relatively balanced: 45% identified as female and 51% as male, while 2 participants chose not to disclose.

In terms of ethnicity, the majority of participants identified as White. Specifically, 30 (61%) described themselves as White - British, and a further 8 (16%) as White - Other. Seven participants identified as Asian, Asian British, or Black or Black British, two identified as Mixed ethnicity, and two preferred not to disclose their ethnicity.



Participants came from a broad range of disciplinary backgrounds, reflected in their affiliations with multiple UKRI funding councils. The largest share (33%) were from the Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council (EPSRC), followed by 11 participants (22%) from the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC). Innovate UK (IUK) was represented by six participants, while both the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) and the Biotechnology and Biological Sciences Research Council (BBSRC) had four each. Smaller numbers were affiliated with the Medical Research Council (MRC) and the Science and Technology Facilities Council (STFC), with three participants each, and the Natural Environment Research Council (NERC), with two. This distribution shows a concentration of participants from physical sciences, engineering, and social sciences. It is not possible to say whether this is reflective of the wider cohort of people that were invited, given that this information sits with UKRI. Please see Section 4.C for further comments.

Participants also represented a diverse mix of host institutions. Russell Group universities accounted for nearly half the total, with 23 participants (47%). Post-92 universities and other institutions (including mid-century and small research intensives) were each represented by six participants. Five (10%) were affiliated with Catapult centres, four with Independent Research Organisations (IROs), and two with other Higher Education Institutions (HEIs).

B. Engagement

The programme saw strong levels of participant engagement across its various formats, with a clear preference for in-person events.

- York Symposium had the highest attendance, with 48 out of 49 participants (98%) taking part.
- London Symposium followed closely, drawing 39 participants (80%).

- Between the events, participants were invited to contribute to tailored Padlet platforms. 13 participants engaged.
- Engagement with the mentoring initiative was not specifically tracked, beyond self-reporting in the one-page summary and post-event surveys.

Looking at patterns of combined participation:

- 38 participants (78%) attended both in-person symposia (York and London), reflecting a strong commitment to face-to-face engagement.
- 11 participants (22%) engaged across all formats—attending both symposia and participating online—demonstrating a smaller core of highly engaged individuals who maximised their involvement in all opportunities offered.

These figures highlight the value placed on in-person interactions, particularly the York symposium, which drew nearly universal attendance. Online engagement, while more modest, provided a meaningful supplement for a subset of participants, enhancing flexibility and reach.

C. Further Analysis

While the evaluation provides valuable insight into delivery and participant experience, several data limitations constrain our ability to assess the programme's broader impact and reach. These limitations largely stem from UKRI's central role in recruitment and the absence of invitee-level data.

Participant vs Non-Participant Insights

As UKRI led participant identification, the Network lacked visibility into who was invited, who declined, and why. This limits our ability to analyse self-selection patterns or assess whether those at earlier leadership stages were less likely to engage. Such insight would support evaluation of audience fit and inform future outreach strategies.

Career Stage and Target Audience

Career stage data was not collected at registration, restricting our understanding of the leadership experience within the cohort. Greater clarity from UKRI on the definition of 'senior research leaders'—and the rationale for selecting the 317 invitees—would aid in assessing alignment between programme aims and participant profiles.

Disciplinary Representation

The disciplinary mix appeared uneven, but without data on the disciplinary breakdown of invitees, it is unclear whether this reflects differences in invitations or engagement rates across fields.

Linking Outcomes to Participant Profile

A more detailed participant profile would strengthen links between outcomes and cohort characteristics. This would support evaluation of how effectively the programme advanced its leadership development goals and guide refinement of future content and targeting.

5. Programme Design

The programme was intentionally designed to be participant-led and responsive, with co-creation embedded from the outset. At recruitment, individuals identified their leadership

needs and objectives (*Supplementary File A*). Each response was reviewed by the FLFDN team and categorised into one or two of six key thematic areas.

- Impact (17 responses)
- Leadership at institution (5 responses)
- General (20 responses)
- People-focused (10 responses)
- Personal resilience (7 responses)
- Strategic (18 responses)

These inputs revealed common themes and challenges that guided both the content and delivery of Symposium 1. The event was built around these shared priorities, and key insights from the first Lab were summarised in a one-page output (*Appendix 2*). The one-page output identified themes of legacy planning and finanacial resilience, which directly informed the design of Symposium 2, which generated a second summary capturing further participant reflections (*Appendix 2*).

These summaries, along with on-the-day observations and informal feedback, shaped the post-event survey (*Supplementary File B*) and, in turn, the evaluation — enabling us to benchmark outcomes against participants' original goals. This iterative approach kept the programme relevant and responsive, allowing for deeper engagement with content aligned to participants' real-time needs and interests.

As a result, future cohorts are likely to receive a version of the programme tailored to their specific priorities, rather than a fixed model. While each iteration may vary, this flexibility is a key strength. The success of this cohort highlights the value of a responsive, participant-led design — providing a robust, adaptable framework to support a diverse range of senior research leaders.

6. Findings

In April, following the second symposium held in London, we developed and distributed a comprehensive survey aimed at gathering longitudinal data on participant experiences. The survey was open from 11-17 April, during which time participants received three reminders to encourage completion. We received eighteen responses — representing over 30% of those accepted into the programme and one-third of all active participants.[1] In this section, we present the key findings of the survey.

A. Participant Satisfaction – Programme Overview – KPI (a), (b), (c)

As noted in Section 3, in developing the RLS Programme, FLFDN established three core key performance indicators (KPIs) which underpinned the Symposia objectives:

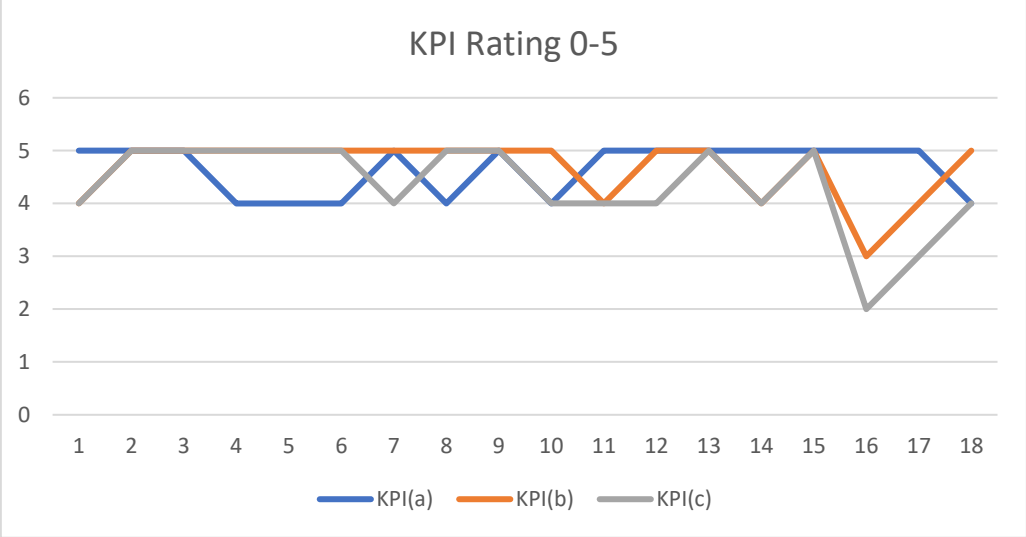
a) Create a diverse cohort of peers
b) Foster peer-to-peer learning through peer activity
c) Support participants' leadership development

[1] On 23 April, the FLFDN Team was contacted by a participant who wished to respond to the survey after returning from annual leave. As their feedback closely aligns with the quantitative data already presented in Section 5, it has not been integrated into that analysis. However, key qualitative insights from their response have been included in Section 7.

In response to KPI(a), respondents returned an average rating of 4.7 out of a possible 5, with two-thirds of respondents returning a score of 5 out of 5.

Similarly, in response to KPI(b), respondents returned an average rating of 4.7 out of a possible 5, with thirteen respondents returning a score of 5 out of 5 and one returning a score of 3.

KPI(c) score slightly lower, with an average rating of 4.3 out of a possible 5. While 50% of respondents gave a top score of 5 out of 5, one respondent gave a score of 2 and another gave a score of 3. However, scores still clustered in the 4-5 range.



Each of the KPIs received average scores between 4 and 5, reflecting strong overall approval of the programme and its core components. While a small number of lower scores were recorded, these were not accompanied by explanatory comments. We outline the responses in more detail below.

> *The Symposia were organised in a way that facilitated peer-to-peer learning, providing structure but offering much opportunity to explore the challenges were we facing as leaders.* – Respondent 2

> *I would really like to see more research leaders from less represented backgrounds.* – Respondent 9

B. Personal Leadership Needs – KPI (d)

As detailed in Sections 3 and 5, participants were invited to identify their own professional development needs during the pre-event registration process. An example of a development goals shared by participants at registration:

> *… Being part of this network would help me to:*
>
> - *Expand my network: Connecting with leaders from across UKRI infrastructure to gain insights and foster collaborations.*
> - *Broaden my understanding: Learn about the diverse research areas supported by UKRI and identify opportunities for interdisciplinary work.*
> - *Contribute to development of innovative services*
> - *Collaborate with other network members to create impactful services that support the research community.*

> *By joining this network, I hope to enhance my leadership skills, expand my knowledge, and ultimately contribute to the improvement of health and wellbeing via impactful research.* – Respondent 9

These self-defined priorities played a central role in shaping the programme design and directly informed our fourth Key Performance Indicator (KPI): *Did the Symposia address the self-defined needs you submitted at registration?*

Of the eighteen survey respondents, sixteen answered positively to the question, "Did the Symposia address the needs you identified?" Several noted the programme's impact in directly supporting their development goals:

> *The programme exceeded my expectations. I left energised and excited about my leadership role, which was greatly needed.* – Respondent 9

The responses suggest that the programme we designed and developed effectively addressed the diverse, self-identified development needs of the majority of participants. However, the nuanced perspectives offered by a small number of respondents highlight the need for continued adaptability in programme design, particularly in supporting experienced leaders and those with highly specific goals.

C. Long Term Impact of Programme

Respondents indicated that the programme was successful in influencing their approach to leadership, with 16 out of 18 respondents indicating that the programme had *meaningfully influenced their leadership approach*. Several respondents spoke to a *renewed sense of confidence*, the value of *peer-to-peer exchange*, and the importance of *having space to reflect critically on their leadership identity*. Others noted that the exposure to different leadership styles and the opportunity to connect across *institutional and disciplinary boundaries significantly shaped their thinking*.

Examples of responses include:

> *Yes. I left each Symposium with a renewed sense of perspective on R&I leadership. A reassurance born of collective experiences about leadership approaches.* – Respondent 3

> *Yes, the opportunities for reflection and discussion in the programme and with people I met there have already led to me trying out new ways of interacting and leading.* – Respondent 6

A few respondents noted that the full extent of the programme's impact would likely emerge over time. Others suggested that a longer or more continuous format could help deepen the influence on their leadership practice:

> *Partially but would do more if it continued.* – Respondent 7

Many participants spoke about increased confidence and a greater clarity on leadership identity:

> *It has expanded my horizons on where I stand as a leader and where I need to focus more. It has also introduced me to a group of individuals with like-minded thinking.* – Respondent 13

Overall, the responses indicate that the programme successfully fostered long-term shifts in participants' thinking and practice as leaders

In the shorter term, responses indicated that the programme has already influenced, or is expected to influence, participants' approaches to decision-making, team management, strategic planning, and self-perception as leaders. Many respondents referred to tangible changes they had begun to implement or were planning to embed within their institutions or projects:

> *Having been able to exchange with attendees with more experience, the programme gave me the opportunity to reflect on other's experience, I have already adopted some of the material shared during the January meeting. The meeting in March with the session on legacy was also extremely useful as I will be applying for several large funding schemes, and legacy of the proposed projects will be built in from the inception.* – Respondent 1

Others noted a deeper appreciation for time spent reflecting, exchanging ideas, and fostering collaboration—activities that they now plan to prioritise within their roles:

> *I certainly became very aware of how important time for reflection, open exchange with peers and connections within and across institutions are. It highlighted how important this is in a context where I am often time-poor. It pays off to make time for reflections, opportunities for feedback and exchange and connection-building.* – Respondent 6

This aligns with in-the-room feedback captured in *Appendix 2* , which indicates how the structured yet open format of the Symposia enabled rapid trust-building, allowing participants to discuss vulnerability and leadership with honesty and depth.

Finally, respondents offered a wide range of reflections on the unexpected consequences of engaging in the programme, providing insight into the deeper, and sometimes intangible, value that emerged through peer interactions, informal conversations, and serendipitous connections. They highlighted both personal and professional gains that extended beyond the programme's original scope:

> *Potential cross council collaborations are emerging from the meetings.* – Respondent 1

> *Connecting with [redacted] helped create new connections to his colleagues which can help in a research effort currently underway…* – Respondent 17

Other reflections pointed to the unexpected strength of the cohort experience. Respondents frequently mentioned a strong sense of camaraderie, even among those who had arrived knowing few others:

> *I had not anticipated the level of camaraderie among the diverse group. I knew only two people on the programme (and one of those not very well), but because of the organisation of especially the York Symposium, bonds were quickly formed.* – Respondent 3

> *The people I have met. A truly unique group of people that we all share something in common despite their diverse set of portfolios we direct/manage.* – Respondent 13

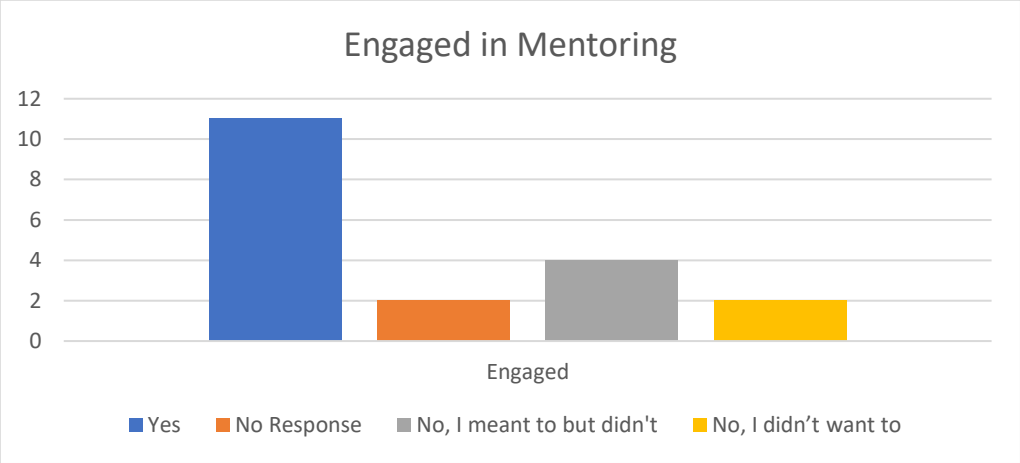
These responses underscore the programme's capacity to generate rich and multifaceted value—through informal moments, peer relationships, and the trust-building fostered by the programme's design.

Respondents identified a range of lasting impacts from the programme, from strengthened leadership confidence to practical institutional changes. The responses align with conversations in the room (*Appendix 2*) where participants described the experience as 'reassuring' and 'transformational,' and noted that exposure to diverse perspectives helped clarify their leadership values and prompted strategic shifts in practice. This suggests that the programme not only met immediate needs but also planted the seeds for sustained personal and professional growth.

D. Response to Mentoring Intervention

Respondents were invited to reflect on their experiences with the mentoring element of the programme, which aimed to foster cross-functional understanding and facilitate dialogue between academic and professional services (PS) leaders.

Of the eighteen survey responses received, eleven participants confirmed that they had undertaken then mentoring tasks, two did not respond, and six did not. Of those six, four indicated that they had intended to, and two indicate that they did not partake because they did not want to.



For those who chose to engage, the mentoring component offered meaningful opportunities to build relationships, challenge assumptions, and increase appreciation for colleagues' roles. Several participants described the experience as eye-opening and valuable in fostering new perspectives on collaboration and leadership:

> *It offered the unique opportunity to learn more from other's activity, realise that we tend to significantly undervalue the outputs of administrative members.* – Respondent 1

> *I had a discussion with our Director of Finance. Yes, a very positive meeting and led both of us to a better understanding of how our departments affect different people in ways we do not necessarily understand. It has changed some of our procedures/some under review.* – Respondent 10

These insights align with reflections captured in *Appendix 2*, where participants noted that mentoring highlighted overlapping challenges between research and professional services staff and catalysed ongoing relationship-building within their institutions.

Respondents also shared that the mentoring conversations helped shift existing working relationships to a more collaborative and personal level:

> *I had two mentoring conversations... In both cases, my relationship with the two moved to a different level, which will only enhance future working.* – Respondent 3

> *I will seek to continue the mentoring relationship established as a result of this programme – having a mentor with professional services. I learnt a huge amount from those few conversations and aim to meet 6-monthly moving forward.* – Respondent 15

Overall, responses reflect a broadly positive reception of the mentoring initiative, particularly in its capacity to build bridges between academic and professional services leadership. The feedback suggests this component played a useful, if varied, role in supporting relational leadership and institutional understanding.

E. Net Promotor Score

To benchmark overall satisfaction and the perceived value of the programme, we explored the inclination of participants to discuss the programme more widely, and to indicate whether they would recommend the programme to colleagues (Net Promoter Score – NPS). NPS is a widely recognised evaluation tool used across sectors to gauge participant loyalty and the likelihood of recommendation. This metric provides a clear, comparable indicator of success, reflecting not only participants' individual experiences but also their confidence in the programme's broader relevance and impact.

All 18 respondents stated that they would recommend the programme to a colleague, effectively giving it a **Net Promoter Score of 100%.** The tone of responses was overwhelmingly positive, with many respondents expressing their endorsement in emphatic terms. Words such as "unique," "invaluable," and "a privilege" were used to describe the experience, highlighting the exceptional opportunity the programme provided to connect meaningfully with peers across the UKRI research and innovation landscape.

Many participants emphasised the value of cross-disciplinary connection and support:

> *Yes. Good to step away from our everyday environment and understand what is going on in the wider ecosystem.* – Respondent 12

Others highlighted the more personal or emotional impact of the programme:

> *It was quite hard to describe! I said it made my head spin but in a good way. And that I met lots of people who made me feel like I could do it.* – Respondent 5

> *A great opportunity to "stop working" and meet with people thinking about how we can design a compelling future for the UK.* – Respondent 13

Some provided qualified recommendations, noting that the programme's value is contingent on participant engagement or role relevance:

> *I would although it would depend what their role was and what they wanted to get out of it.* – Respondent 7

However, the majority of participants offered clear, affirmative endorsements:

> *I would highly recommend the programme, and I hope UKRI will continue it bringing together more cohorts* – Respondent 1

Key themes across the responses included the value of protected time for reflection, exposure to diverse leadership experiences, peer learning, and network-building across disciplines. Several respondents explicitly emphasised the lasting connections and practical insights gained, suggesting that the programme supports both immediate and long-term leadership development.

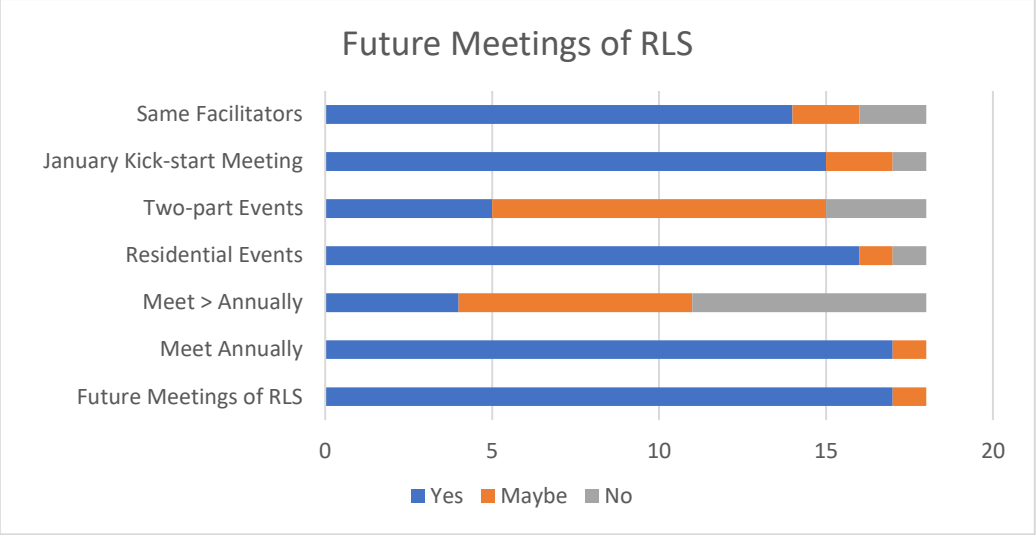
D. Event Level Feedback

The event-level feedback reveals a highly positive response to the overall structure and design of the programme, particularly the emphasis on reflection, informal networking, and interactive formats. Invited speakers, mentoring sessions, and case study presentations were praised for their inspiration and relevance, particularly when they aligned with participants' personal or professional challenges. There was appreciation for the light-touch facilitation, the opportunity for “corridor conversations”, and the overall atmosphere of trust and openness that supported cohort building.

However, areas for improvement were also identified: some participants desired more structured or directive content, others suggested enhancing inclusivity in networking to ensure broader interaction across the group. While the Olympic Park outing in London was acknowledged as a welcome change of pace, its overall impact was questioned.

7. Moving Forward with RLS

Survey responses demonstrate strong and enthusiastic support for the continuation and evolution of the RLS network. Participants expressed a clear desire for the network to remain active, with 94.4% of respondents interested in attending future meetings, and an equal proportion favouring the current annual format. There is also a notable preference for residential events (89%), reinforcing the value placed on in-person connection and immersive experiences.

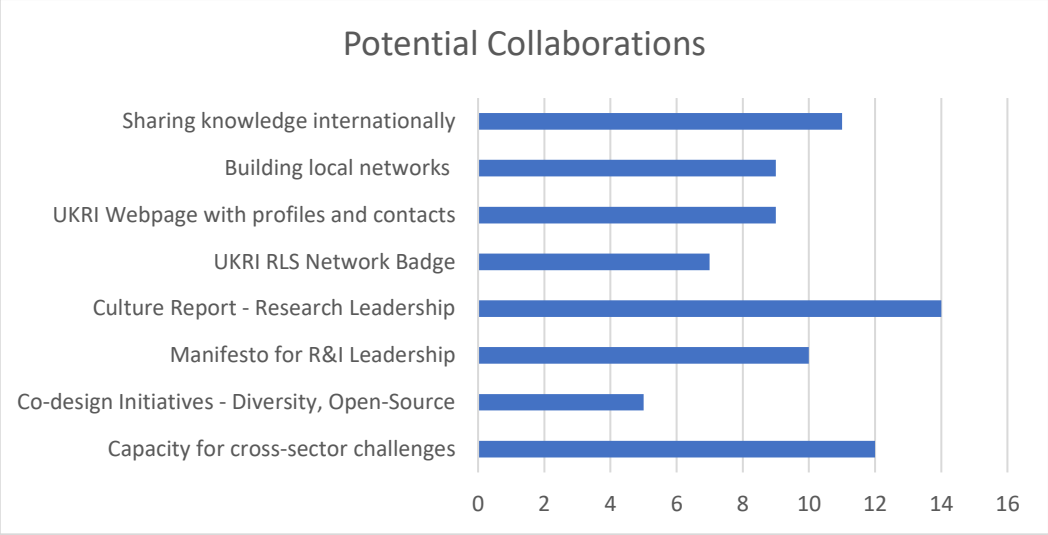


While annual meetings remain the preferred structure, views on meeting more frequently were mixed. Four respondents supported additional gatherings, seven opposed the idea, and seven were unsure—indicating that flexibility in frequency may be important as the network evolves. Similarly, while fifteen participants preferred a January start to the year, and most respondents wished to retain the current facilitators, there was some openness to new leadership, suggesting that consistency and continuity remain important but not fixed requirements.

The structure of future events may benefit from further discussion, as views on the two-part format trialled in 2025 were divided. Only five respondents supported the format, with three opposed and ten unsure. This reflects an opportunity to co-design future formats that meet diverse preferences while preserving the core strengths of the programme.

Beyond the structure and timing of formal events, respondents also expressed strong interest in maintaining and deepening connections within the network. While ten respondents were open to attending self-organised meetings, fewer were confident about hosting or organising them, indicating that additional support or scaffolding might be needed to enable more autonomous activity. There is moderate interest in regional and discipline-specific sub-networks, although broader, more inclusive events remain more popular.

Importantly, respondents expressed enthusiasm for collaborative opportunities that extend beyond the RLS network itself. Joint events with Future Leaders Fellows (FLFs) were widely supported, reflecting an appetite for cross-network exchange. There was also considerable interest in international engagement, particularly through Horizon Europe and partnerships with leaders in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs)—highlighting a desire to foster more globally connected and inclusive leadership networks.



The idea of a shared resource hub also resonated strongly, with 77.8% of respondents supporting the development of a central platform for sharing frameworks, readings, and talks. Interest in peer mentoring (11 respondents) and monthly informal coffee chats (50%) further illustrates the value participants place on reciprocal, peer-driven learning and informal connection. This was reflective of conversations captured in *Appendix 2*, where participants proposed mechanisms such as informal coffee chats, shared digital spaces, and cross-cohort mentoring to support ongoing engagement and collective leadership development.

Looking forward, many participants signalled a desire to play an active role in shaping the future of research leadership. Fourteen respondents expressed interest in contributing to a culture report on the future of research leadership, and twelve were keen to collaborate on addressing cross-sector challenges. Ten showed interest in co-authoring a manifesto for Research and Innovation Leadership, underscoring a commitment to influencing leadership values and practices across the sector.

While fewer respondents (five) expressed interest in co-designing diversity initiatives or exploring open-source implementation, and seven were open to adopting a UKRI RLS Network badge, these ideas may still offer valuable directions for further exploration. Half of respondents were also interested in building local networks with senior leaders, postdocs, and students—extending the network's impact within institutions and communities.

In summary, the RLS cohort has built a strong foundation of trust, engagement, and ambition. There is clear appetite not only to continue the programme but to expand its scope—regionally, globally, and intellectually. With thoughtful facilitation, flexible structures, and continued participant involvement, the RLS cohort is well-positioned to grow as a vibrant, collaborative, and future-facing community of research leaders.

8. Key Qualitative Feedback from Survey Respondent 19

On 23 April, the FLFDN Team was contacted by a participant who wished to respond to the survey after returning from annual leave. As their feedback closely aligns with the quantitative data already presented in Section 5, it has not been integrated into that analysis. However, we present here key qualitative data:

[RLS] is not a formal training programme, it is about people uniting and sharing experiences that can benefit each other. The overall work was about "what does good look like" within this space that is exceptionally uncatered for. This was about leading minds being able to share best practices, challenges, nuances and learn from each other across a diverse programme.

9. Budget

The programme was delivered successfully and within budget, with a final underspend of £1,930 from a total allocation of £126,497, equating to 98.5% budget utilisation. This outcome reflects effective financial planning, disciplined delivery, and responsive budgetmanagement. A total of £124,566 was expended, with funds strategically allocated across key areas of activity.

Staffing represented the largest area of spend, with a combined total of £61,276.20—approximately 49% of the total budget. This encompassed programme management, administration, facilitation, mentoring, photography/videography, and contingency-supported roles. Staffing demands proved significantly higher than anticipated. More intensive collaboration with UKRI—compared to previous programmes—necessitated regular coordination meetings and increased participant support. Additional staff time was required for programme design, communications, venue liaison, and coordination.

Facilitator time was also underestimated. Initial projections assumed in-kind contributions from the Network, which were ultimately not required. Corresponding funds were reallocated to cover actual delivery needs. The flexible deployment of contingency funds was essential in supporting these expanded staffing requirements.

Symposia delivery formed the second-largest area of expenditure:

- Symposium 1 (January, York) cost £17,561 (14.1% of the budget) and was delivered cost-effectively, with underspends in accommodation, travel, and dinner.
- Symposium 2 (March, London) accounted for £40,848 (32.3% of the budget). While some overspends occurred—particularly in delegate and dinner costs—these were offset by savings in other areas and covered through contingency.

Symposium 2 represented a disproportionate share of the budget, in part due to the location in London, and partially as the venue was unable to adjust bookings to reflect final attendance. This issue was compounded by a higher-than-expected rate of last-minute dropouts due to illness and scheduling conflicts, including overlap with an unanticipated UKRI event. Future delivery should include improved scheduling coordination and the selection of venues offering greater flexibility in cancellation policies.

Additional project costs, including website development, subscriptions, and evaluation, totalled £6,883 (5.4% of the budget). Minor underspends were noted in printing and guest fees, as several guests generously waived honoraria. The full contingency allocation of £11,499 was used strategically to support staffing and minor overspends, underscoring the programme's adaptability to evolving needs. In addition, the FLF Development Network provided in-kind support, enabling the Programme Manager to complete this evaluation.

This programme—delivered on a budget of approximately £126k—was a strong success, achieving a Net Promoter Score of 100% and receiving exceptionally positive participant feedback. Despite minor overspends in specific areas, the programme delivered high impact

with efficient use of resources, catalysing valuable collaboration and securing commitments to future engagement. The investment clearly delivered excellent value and measurable outcomes.

Recommendations for future budgets include:

- More accurate forecasting of staff and facilitator time requirements.
- Flexible venue arrangements to mitigate the impact of late cancellations.
- Improved coordination with external stakeholders to avoid scheduling conflicts.
- Expanded contingency planning to include post-event evaluation, printing, and software licensing—estimated at an additional £25,000 to fully cover wrap-up activities beyond the delivery phase.

10. Recommendations

A. General Recommendations

1. Offer a form of leadership development for UKRI Senior Research Leaders
Incorporate structured leadership development—such as the RLS—into the career pathways of UKRI-funded researchers, with a particular focus on mid to senior-level leaders. We have made suggestions for proposed models in Section 10.B.

2. Enhance Diversity
Strengthen efforts to ensure diversity within RLS cohorts by proactively recruiting participants from underrepresented groups, disciplines, and institutions. This should include a focus on equity of access across geographic, institutional, and demographic lines, reinforcing UKRI's broader commitments to inclusive research culture and leadership.

3. Review and Broaden Mentoring and Peer Support Models
Reassess the mentoring offer to ensure it is relevant, accessible, and tailored to varying leadership contexts (eg Catapults). Consider offering formal peer-to-peer support structures to enhance the cohort and support interpersonal relationships.

4. Foster Co-creation and Participant Leadership in RLS Design
Encourage deeper co-creation in future RLS iterations by involving participants in programme planning and development. This is best achieved through a stable, annual format that allows sufficient lead time for facilitators and contributors to engage meaningfully with participant needs.

5. Additional capacity and resources for full evaluation
This evaluation has been restricted somewhat by the time and resource constraints of the commission. In future iterations, it would be useful to embed longer term evaluation into programme design. Further commentary is provided in Section 10.C.

B. Proposed Models for Future Iterations

Building on the success of the 2025 pilot and in response to strong participant appetite for continued engagement, we propose four scalable models for future delivery. Each varies in intensity, resource requirements, and depth of engagement, enabling UKRI to select an approach aligned with strategic priorities.

Model 1: Light-Touch Network – "Networked Alumni"

This model replicates the 2025 Research Leadership Symposia structure, followed by a light-touch alumni engagement phase.

Key Features:

- Two-part symposium in Year 1 for a cohort of up to 60 senior leaders
- A programme that enables cross-disciplinary working and development across the investments
- Annual online survey to track impact and gather feedback
- Informal online platform or mailing list for peer exchange and updates
- Optional quarterly virtual meet-ups (e.g. lunchtime drop-ins)
- UKRI-endorsed digital badge for participants
- Peer-matching tools (e.g. Coffee Connect or opt-in mentoring)

This model enables UKRI to maintain a visible, low-cost connection with alumni while reinforcing its commitment to leadership development. It supports continued peer engagement without requiring significant ongoing investment.

This model could be applied retrospectively to the 2025 cohort with additional time and resource.

Model 2: Structured Annual Cohort – "Annual Cohort Plus"

This model builds on the 2025 symposia by introducing a light but structured annual engagement programme.

Key Features:

- Two-part symposium in Year 1 for a cohort of up to 60 senior leaders
- A programme that enables cross-disciplinary working and development across the investments
- Mid-year virtual check-in for each active cohort
- Annual in-person convening for each cohort (Years 2–5)
- Annual online survey to track impact and gather feedback
- Light-touch online space for ongoing peer exchange as outlined in Model 1
- Optional quarterly virtual meet-ups (e.g. lunchtime drop-ins)
- UKRI-endorsed digital badge for participants
- Annual reflections capturing cohort-wide learning

This option supports lasting peer relationships and continued cross-disciplinary dialogue. It offers UKRI regular, low-burden touchpoints with funded leaders, while generating insights into sector trends and evolving leadership challenges.

This model could be applied retrospectively to the 2025 cohort with additional time and resource.

Model 3: Flagship Rolling Fellowship – "Sustained Leadership Cohorts"

Our preferred model extends the symposia into a structured, multi-year fellowship with integrated evaluation and engagement tools.

Key Features:

- Two-part symposium in Year 1 for a cohort of up to 60 senior leaders
- A programme that enables cross-disciplinary working and development across the investments
- Mid-year virtual check-in for each active cohort
- Annual in-person convening for each cohort (Years 2–5)
- Annual online survey to track impact and gather feedback
- Optional peer-led discussion groups and thematic workshops
- Optional quarterly virtual meet-ups (e.g. lunchtime drop-ins)
- UKRI-endorsed digital badge for participants
- Five-year participation window (or until UKRI funding ends)
- Embedded digital infrastructure: peer forums, mentoring tools, Coffee Connect, and UKRI-endorsed badge
- Thematic working groups or cohort-led initiatives aligned with UKRI priorities
- Built-in longitudinal evaluation (annual surveys, case studies, final impact report)

This model creates a sustained leadership development ecosystem. It supports ongoing engagement across cohorts, enables sector-wide insights, and builds a dynamic, cross-disciplinary community. The structure balances strategic alignment, long-term visibility, and robust evidence of impact.

Model 3 has been developed based on participant feedback provided in the post-event survey, which aligns closely with the one-page summary from Symposium 2. However, we note that this model would require a greater investment of time and financial resources.

C. Evaluation

There is a strong appetite among participants to continue engaging with the programme, as evidenced by both in-room feedback and survey responses. In this pilot, we primarily based our evaluation on responses to a survey that we made open to participants for one week, largely due to time constraints on the project. For future programmes, we recommend the post-event survey be open for longer, to allow for fuller engagement.

In addition, we recommend a follow-up evaluation to capture the programme's longer-term impact. A low-cost longitudinal survey or targeted case studies, 12 months post-programme, would help assess how learning has been applied, how peer networks have evolved, and how participants' leadership contexts have changed.

This could be complemented by an in-person cohort meeting to renew connections and gather deeper insights. This mirrors the Pathways evaluation approach, which included a six-month follow-up survey and has a further touchpoint planned for 2026 to assess long-term outcomes.

By embedding a longer term evaluation to the programme design, UKRI can ensure that the value of this programme is sustained, the impact is fully understood, and the relationships built within the cohort continue to thrive—ultimately helping UKRI shape future programmes that are even more impactful and aligned with the evolving needs of leaders.

11. Conclusions

The Research Leadership Symposia (RLS) successfully delivered a well-received, strategically aligned development opportunity for senior research leaders across the UKRI-funded landscape. Participant feedback consistently highlighted the value of the programme in fostering reflection, peer learning, and cross-disciplinary exchange—critical capabilities in a complex and evolving research environment.

The two-part residential format was praised for its immersive design and strong facilitation, which enabled open, productive dialogue. The cohort described gaining renewed confidence, clearer leadership identity, and tangible strategies for institutional impact. A strong peer network has emerged, marked by trust, collaboration, and shared ambition.

The programme was delivered within budget, with a 98.5% utilisation rate and a modest underspend of £1,930 from the total allocation of £126,497. Strategic use of contingency funding supported additional staffing and delivery needs, reflecting effective financial and operational management.

The mentoring component, while variably taken up, was positively received by those who participated. It contributed to greater appreciation of relational leadership and highlighted the value of cross-functional dialogue between research and professional services.

Critically, the programme demonstrated clear alignment with participants' self-defined development needs. Themes such as legacy planning, emotional intelligence, and financial resilience were addressed in depth, reinforcing the relevance of a responsive, co-created model.

Looking forward, participants expressed strong support for the continuation and expansion of the RLS. Among four proposed models, the preferred option is Model 3: the Flagship Rolling Fellowship – "Sustained Leadership Cohorts". This model balances strategic alignment with long-term impact, offering a structured, multi-year leadership journey with embedded evaluation, thematic initiatives, and ongoing peer engagement.

Based on the evaluation, key recommendations include:

- Embedding structured leadership development into UKRI pathways for senior researchers;
- Enhancing diversity through more targeted outreach;
- Strengthening mentoring and peer-support mechanisms;
- Enabling greater participant co-creation;
- Allocating additional resources (~£25,000) for post-delivery evaluation, software, and legacy planning.

The strategic Research Leadership Symposia pilot has laid a strong foundation for a sustainable, scalable leadership development initiative. It offers UKRI a proven model to invest in leadership capacity, foster research culture, and connect leaders across disciplines, institutions, and sectors.

12. Appendices and Supplementary Files

Appendix 1 – Programmes

Strategic Research Leadership Symposia: Session 1

Event Themes:

Day 1: Connectivity and Influence
Day 2: Network Value and Institutional Impact

Outline: Day 1: January 9th

Morning: Connectivity and Common Ground

09:30-10:00 | Welcome and Networking
Collect your Symposium Guide and connect with peers.

10:00-10:30 | Opening Session
Overview of the symposium's objectives and guidelines. Understand how these align with your interests and set engagement expectations.

10:30-11:30 | Connecting Through Challenges
Engage in discussions on themes like resilience, impact, and leadership challenges. Share and learn from peer perspectives.

11:30-12:00 | Question Capture
Participate in a group discussion to identify key questions that will shape future conversations and inform our next event.

12:00-14:00 | Interactive Lunch and Paired Walk
Enjoy a flexible buffet and pair with a colleague for a walk to encourage creative networking.

Afternoon: Influence

14:00-14:30 | Insights and Influence
Reflect on initial insights and explore new influence opportunities.

14:30-15:00 | Guest Speaker: Professor Cath Noakes
Learn about leveraging unexpected opportunities for influence from Professor Noakes' experiences.

15:00-16:45 | Influence Workshop
Participate in two rounds of small group discussions to delve into influence strategies. Share resources and craft action plans.

16:45 | Wrap-Up and Networking
Wind down with informal networking time.

19:00 | Dinner with Guest Speaker
Details will be confirmed soon.

Outline: Day 2: January 10th

Morning: Network Value

09:00-09:45 | Uncovering Leadership Blindspots
Identify leadership blindspots and share insights and advice.

09:45-10:30 | Exploring Network Potential
Discuss the value of this network and its potential impact on your leadership journey. Provide feedback for future event planning.

10:30-11:00 | Coffee Break

11:00-12:30 | Building Impact in Your Organisations and Communities
Two small group discussions with colleagues from compatible sectors and institutions to explore how you will leverage your role as leader within your hosts, and create objectives and aims.

12:30-13:30 | Lunch

Afternoon: Institutional Impact

13:30-15:00 | Local Ecosystem Impact
Focus on evolving leadership within your local context to build mutually beneficial relationships. Lead by Dr Kay Guccione, this session will explore how building effective and mutually beneficial relationships with non-academic and non-research colleagues in your organisation will help you achieve more ambitious research and innovation outcomes.

15:00-16:00 | Emerging Issues and Closing

Strategic Research Leadership Symposia: Session 2

March 25th: Engaging Leadership, Inspiring Action

09:00 - 09:30 | Welcome and Coffee
Start your day with a coffee, settle in, and get ready to reconnect with the group. Bag drop and networking available.

09:30 - 10:00 | Reconnecting & Setting the Stage
A reflection on the key takeaways from York, the progress since, and what we aim to accomplish in the Symposium. We'll also introduce key UKRI guests and set the tone for the day.

10:00 - 11:00 | Mentoring Insights: Reflection & Impact
What did the mentoring experience teach us? We'll dive into how peer-to-peer mentoring is shaping leadership development, its value, and its lasting impact. This is a chance to reflect, share, and learn from each other's experiences.

11:00 - 11:15 | Coffee Break & Networking
Grab a coffee, reconnect with fellow participants, and refresh before we move into deeper discussions.

11:15 - 12:15 | Unlocking Possibilities: What's Now Within Reach?
Building on the insights from York and mentoring, we'll focus on what's possible moving forward. This session is all about taking leadership ideas and translating them into tangible actions. What steps will you take to apply your learnings in real-world scenarios? Let's begin crafting your action plans.

12:15 – 13:00 | Lunch
Enjoy a lunch break and continue discussions about future actions.

13:00 – 14:00 | What does space mean to you?
In this session, we'll explore how the spaces we create—both physical and organizational—impact leadership. How have you structured teams or workspaces to foster innovation and creativity? What unconventional spaces have you used to shift thinking and approach leadership? As we prepare for our site visit, let's discuss how changing environments can inspire new perspectives and leadership strategies.

14:00 - 17:00 | Site Visit: Legacy in Action – Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park – Plexal
Join us at Plexal for a presentation by the London Legacy Development Corporation on legacy building, long-term planning, and visionary leadership. We'll take a guided tour of the iconic Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park to explore how strategic vision transformed the area into a lasting legacy of the 2012 London Olympics.

17:30 - 18:00 | Downtime & Check-In
Take an hour to relax and unwind. We'll reconvene at 18:00 in the bar to touch base and share thoughts from the day.

18:30 - 19:00 | Drinks Reception – informal, optional
An opportunity to mingle with the day's guests in a relaxed, informal setting. Get to know fellow attendees and connect over insights from the day.

19:00 - 21:00 | Dinner with Guests
A chance to share a meal with UKRI Board members, site visit leaders, and invited guests. We'll also review any requests or updates from the group and discuss next steps with UKRI.

March 26th: Shaping the Future, Leading the Legacy

09:00 - 10:00 | In Conversation with Professor Dame Ottoline Leyser, Chief Executive of UKRI
Join us for an insightful discussion with Professor Dame Ottoline Leyser, Chief Executive of UK Research and Innovation. Drawing on her leadership experience at UKRI, Professor Leyser will share her views on strategic leadership, building a lasting legacy, and driving long-term impact in global research.

10:00 - 10:30 | Reflecting on Professor Leyser's Vision
After the first session, we'll open the floor for a group discussion. UKRI representatives will be available to share thoughts, and you'll have a chance to delve deeper into the insights shared. This is your moment to reflect and ask questions about national research strategy.

10:30 - 11:00 | Coffee Break & Networking
A short break to recharge and connect before diving into the next session.

11:00 - 12:00 | Funding the Future: Legacy in Action
Building on the strategic insights from UKRI, we'll turn our focus to the funding models that support long-term legacy thinking. Professor Kerry Hood will share her expertise on securing funding for sustainable projects while balancing short-term opportunities. This session will offer practical insights into funding strategies for visionary leadership.

12:30 - 13:30 | Lunch & Networking
Take a break, enjoy lunch, and continue conversations with peers and UKRI members.

13:30 - 15:00 | Future Me: Designing Your Legacy
This session will shift gears and focus on your own leadership journey. What messages would your future self have for you today? In this session, we'll work backwards from the legacy you envision to identify the steps needed to get there. We'll introduce tools for future forecasting and leadership planning, helping you design your path forward.

15:00 - 15:45 | Looking Ahead: Next Steps
We'll discuss ideas for how you can continue to stay connected and collaborate beyond the end of the Symposium.

15:45 - 16:00 | Closing Remarks & Staying Connected
A final thank you for your participation and insights.

Strategic Research Leaders Symposia 1 – January 2025 – Key outcomes and feedback

Introduction: The Strategic Research Leaders Symposia initiative was circulated to 317 leaders of UKRI strategic investments, with 55 engaging with the programme. Participants were drawn to the opportunity to connect, learn from peers, and explore a dedicated network. Programme design prioritised space for discussions with maximum "churn" of participants.

Event Structure: The SRL Symposia 1 (SRLS 1) took place on 9/10 January in York, with one keynote, Prof. Cath Noakes, who discussed her experience working on SAGE and COBRA. This, and input from the facilitators, prompted dynamic group discussions on:

- Leadership challenges identified by delegates: strategic delivery, institutional positioning, staff management, personal resilience, and sustainable funding.
- Knowledge gaps and network opportunities, including desires for a formal network.
- What influence means to them, where they've succeeded and where they need new ideas.

Participants were assigned to groups based on leadership experience, geographic location, value discipline, and investment maturity. Each participant received a booklet with delegate photos, career summaries, and attendance objectives. The booklet will be reprinted for the London event, providing an opportunity for UKRI to include additional information.

Emerging Themes:

- Rapid trust-building enabled open dialogue on vulnerability and honesty in leadership, which the facilitators linked to building high-integrity research and innovation cultures.
- Participants expressed varied motivations. Some sought a formal voice and position on R&I issues and UKRI funding strategy, while others focused on peer networks and supporting strategic investment leadership. We are keen for the appropriate colleagues from UKRI to attend SLRS 2 (London, 25/26 March) and respond to/reflect on these.
- Some participants expected more direct support, including leadership training at award-stage.
- Legacy planning emerged as a critical theme, with discussions on preparing for post-funding scenarios and managing investment-related uncertainties. Facilitators and symposia attendees have chosen this as a core theme in the next event.
- A unifying theme across discussions was improving approaches to people, environment, and culture, exploring challenges in balancing these in uncertain funding environments.
- Participants noted the cross-disciplinary approach was critical for the initiative's success.

Ongoing engagement in lead up to Symposia 2 (March): We have established a comprehensive communication plan to support delegates between symposia and facilitate our mentoring programme. Delegates can utilize Padlet boards to exchange ideas, challenges, and contact details. There is capacity for additional boards. This engagement will inform the planning of SLRS 2 (London, 25/26 March) where we will explore the initial impacts of the Symposia on their leadership.

Support and Contributions from UKRI:

- Identify possible guests for Symposia dinner (intersectoral leaders, cultural leaders)
- Explore legacy connections, such as the former Olympic lab now hosting an MRC centre
- Identify what support or opportunities – if any – UKRI can offer a future network

Conclusion: The Strategic Research Leaders Symposia Network has emerged as a promising platform for fostering trust, enhancing leadership skills, and addressing sectoral challenges. Continued engagement, structured support, and expanded participation will be crucial as it evolves into a meaningful influence in research and innovation leadership.

Strategic Research Leadership Symposia 2 – March 2025 – Major Themes

The second Strategic Research Leadership Symposia took place in London on 25–26 March 2025, bringing together 37 RLS participants, alongside colleagues from the FLF Development Network and UKRI, for two days of energising, thoughtful, and deeply engaging conversation.

Throughout the event, participants explored a wide range of topics, sharing leadership experiences, navigating sector-wide challenges, and building connections across disciplines, roles, and institutions. The atmosphere was incredibly positive, with a strong enthusiasm for continued collaboration.

A central theme that emerged was the importance of emotionally intelligent leadership. Participants discussed how bravery and authenticity are essential to their leadership, particularly when navigating difficult interpersonal dynamics and complex institutional structures in shifting geo-political environments. Leaders also expressed common worry regarding budget cuts weakening EDI and research culture initiatives, while emphasizing the urgent need to embed those same values into investment decision.

The shifting institutional and policy landscape was another ongoing thread throughout the discussions. Participants reflected on the sector's growing complexity, emphasizing the need for greater financial literacy, a clear sense of purpose, and strategic agility in the face of uncertainty.

The concept of "space" emerged as a key focus—spanning both physical spaces as well as strategic and emotional realms. Participants voiced concerns about the erosion of collaborative spaces and called for new environments that not only serve functional needs but also promote inclusivity and social richness. They also highlighted the challenge of carving out space within their own demanding workloads to think and act strategically, especially as operational pressures continue to grow.

Our mentoring intervention sparked rich discussions about fostering connections between leaders in academic and professional services. Participants noted an increasing understanding of common challenges and common goals, and shared frameworks for increased support and knowledge exchange.

While attendees shared excellent ideas for evolving as a cohort and supporting one another going forward, there was clear consensus on one key point: face-to-face engagement, like the Symposia itself, remains their strong preference. Many described the experience as uniquely powerful, with calls to meet again and build on the momentum we've started together.

The response to the RLS programme has been overwhelmingly affirming. Participants consistently emphasised how much they valued the intervention, both for the sense of community it fostered and for the space it created to think strategically—something many

leaders feel is in short supply. We have initiated our evaluation of the programme by circulating a detailed feedback survey, which includes a call for specific case studies: https://forms.gle/eZ98sBNXBeHFGZ688. Our goal is to build a well-rounded picture of how the event was experienced and the value it delivered. We hope to provide you with our evaluation and recommendations in the coming weeks.

Appendix 3 – Raw Data from Symposia 1 - ***REDACTED***

Appendix 4 – Raw Data from Symposia 2 - ***REDACTED***

Supplementary File A– Participant List, Demographics, Engagement (Anonymised) – Attached Separately

Supplementary File B – Research Leadership Symposia Participant Feedback (Anonymised) – Attached Separately

Supplementary File C – Research Leadership Symposia Projected and Actual Budget