

Thriving Food Futures Early Career Researcher (ECR) Network: Terms of Reference June 2025

The early stages of a research career are crucial for developing skills, building networks, and establishing support systems for long-term success. This can be challenging for those working in complex, interdisciplinary fields like those relating to healthy, sustainable, and equitable diets and food systems. Even within large consortium projects like Thriving Food Futures, getting started can feel disconnected, especially when work is spread across teams and institutions.

The Thriving Food Futures Early Career Researcher (ECR) Network was established in May 2025 to create a space for ECRs to connect, share expertise, develop new skills, and collaborate across projects relating to diets/food systems. The network aligns with the broader goals of the Thriving Food Futures project and its interdisciplinary nature.

The network is supported by the THRIVING Food Futures project funded by UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) and National Institute for Health and Care Research (NIHR), and its host institutions include:

- The University of Oxford
- The University of Cambridge
- The University of Warwick
- Queen Mary University of London
- University of Strathclyde
- City St. Georges University of London
- Sustain

Purpose and Scope

The Thriving Food Futures ECR Network aims to support researchers in the early stages of their academic careers by fostering connection, skill development, and collaboration within and beyond the Thriving Food Futures project. The network provides a space for ECRs working in areas related to healthy, sustainable, and equitable food systems to build methodological expertise, gain transferable skills, and raise the visibility of their work. It also seeks to strengthen a sense of community among researchers who may otherwise feel disconnected, particularly across institutional and disciplinary boundaries.

The network focuses on three core areas:

1. Skill sharing and development – including bi-monthly online sessions to support methodological and practical learning, as well as transferable skills for career progression.
2. Project-specific collaboration – sharing relevant opportunities aligned with the aims of Thriving Food Futures and encouraging host institution researchers to advertise suitable activities.
3. Visibility and dissemination – supporting ECRs to showcase their work through contributions to the Thriving Food Futures website and other communication channels.

Membership

Membership is open to anyone who considers themselves to be early in their academic career. We recognise that this is a subjective category that varies by individual and context. While the network was initially created for ECRs directly involved in the Thriving Food Futures project, we also welcome ECRs from participating institutions and from the wider research community to promote broader engagement and foster new

connections. Individuals must have an interest in research relating to healthy, sustainable, and equitable diets and food systems.

Activities

All activities will be promoted to members who have signed up via the above form through the Thriving Food Futures ECR Network email mailing list.

The network will host bi-monthly online skill-sharing sessions open to all members. These sessions will cover a range of themes and be led by experienced researchers from the Thriving project and beyond (including methodological expertise and career advice). Conducted via MS Teams, each session will typically last 1–2 hours, depending on the activity. We aim to offer skills relevant to everyone, so please get in touch if there's a specific topic, you'd like covered (contact details are below). We are aware that it is useful to be able to apply skills once they have been learnt, and we have therefore tried, where possible, to align skills with other collaborative opportunities (please see below).

Project-specific collaboration opportunities will be advertised through the network as they become available. Each listing will include details on the provider, the nature of the activity, and the expected time commitment. These opportunities can range from one-off tasks, such as reviewing a protocol, to mini placements at host institutions funded by Thriving Food Futures. Other activities may include screening articles for reviews, advising on research methods, or joining advisory panels.

Visibility and dissemination activities will also be communicated as they arise. For instance, if you participate in a network collaboration, you may be invited to write a short statement about your experience for the Thriving Food Futures blog.

While the network will primarily meet online, we plan to host in-person activities at least once a year, timed with key project milestones and relevant events or conferences. Details of in-person activities will be shared throughout the network in advance.

Mentoring

Some experienced researchers within the Thriving Food Futures project are offering career development mentoring opportunities which will last 6 months to 1 year. Network members can sign up to be matched with a mentor — a more senior expert in diets and food systems — to support their professional and personal development goals. These opportunities will be offered through the network as they become available.

Thriving Food Futures Network Committee

The network is coordinated by a small committee of volunteer ECRs, with support from senior project leads where appropriate. The committee includes Dr Elizabeth Eveleigh, University of Cambridge; Dr Alistair Brown, University of Strathclyde; Dr Megan Arthur, City St. Georges University of London; Andrea Zick, City St. Georges University of London.

We are currently looking for more committee members, please get in touch using the details below if this is of interest.

Finances, payments and remuneration

The Thriving Food Futures ECR Network is free to join for members. Some funded opportunities may be offered through the network on a case-by-case basis.

Member Database: In the future, we may offer the opportunity to join a Member Database, allowing you to contact individuals within the network directly for collaboration/networking. You will be able to control your involvement and addition of your details to this.

Review and Evaluation

The network's structure and activities will be reviewed annually, incorporating feedback from members. Activities will adapt based on evolving needs and opportunities.

Correspondence, contact details and online presence

Correspondence of the Network is coordinated by the committee through our email address: thrivingecr@gmail.com

Please get in touch if you have any questions, would like to join the committee, or have an idea for a future skill sharing online session.

Emails will be sent to share network activities, opportunities, and external events and seminars as relevant.

The Thriving Food Futures website and Blue-Sky account (<https://www.phc.ox.ac.uk/research/research-themes/health-behaviours-theme/sustainable-healthy-food-group/thriving>) is used to share information about the network, along with project-relevant activities and events.

Many thanks for your interest in the network.