

ChemComm

Accepted Manuscript



This is an *Accepted Manuscript*, which has been through the Royal Society of Chemistry peer review process and has been accepted for publication.

Accepted Manuscripts are published online shortly after acceptance, before technical editing, formatting and proof reading. Using this free service, authors can make their results available to the community, in citable form, before we publish the edited article. We will replace this *Accepted Manuscript* with the edited and formatted *Advance Article* as soon as it is available.

You can find more information about *Accepted Manuscripts* in the [Information for Authors](#).

Please note that technical editing may introduce minor changes to the text and/or graphics, which may alter content. The journal's standard [Terms & Conditions](#) and the [Ethical guidelines](#) still apply. In no event shall the Royal Society of Chemistry be held responsible for any errors or omissions in this *Accepted Manuscript* or any consequences arising from the use of any information it contains.



Journal Name

COMMUNICATION

Quantitative Determination of Fluoride in Pure Water using Luminescent Europium Complexes

Received 00th January 20xx,
Accepted 00th January 20xx

Stephen J. Butler*^a

DOI: 10.1039/x0xx00000x

www.rsc.org/

Two luminescent probes [Eu.L¹⁻²]⁺ are reported for the rapid detection of fluoride in water. [Eu.L¹⁻²]⁺ exhibit exceptional enhancements in Eu emission in the presence of fluoride, permitting its selective determination within the environmentally relevant concentration range (20–210 μM).

Fluoride is considered essential for healthy teeth and bone growth; in several countries this has led to the artificial fluoridation of water supplies. Fluoride is also introduced into water supplies through the production of phosphate containing fertilizers and aluminium processing industries. Consumption of elevated levels of fluoride in drinking water can cause dental and skeletal fluorosis, as well as acute gastric problems and kidney failure. Therefore, controlling the level of fluoride in water supplies is a global governmental concern; the maximum recommended concentration of fluoride in drinking water defined by the World Health Organization guidelines is 4 mg L⁻¹, or 210 μM. Consequently, the development of convenient analytical methods for the rapid, quantitative detection of fluoride in water samples has become an active area of research.

Traditional methods for the accurate analysis of fluoride involve the use of ion-selective electrodes and ion chromatography. However, such approaches can be time-consuming, require expensive instrumentation and are not practical for measuring fluoride concentrations *in vivo*. In recent years, a number of alternative strategies have been devised, such as the development of colorimetric or luminescent molecular probes, and reaction-based (irreversible) chemodosimeters.¹⁻⁶ The creation of probes for

fluoride recognition in water is particularly challenging because of the high free energy of hydration of fluoride ($-\Delta G^{\circ}_{\text{hyd}} = 465 \text{ kJ mol}^{-1}$) compared to other anions, together with its relatively small ionic radius (1.26 Å). Most probes reported to date are limited in sensing applications, because they suffer from interference from other anions present in water samples (e.g. chloride, nitrate, sulfate and phosphate) that bind competitively. Furthermore, very few probes can actually detect fluoride ions in a pure aqueous medium¹; the majority of reported systems are restricted for use in organic solvents such as acetonitrile², DMSO³, methanol⁴ or dichloromethane⁵, or they require a solvent mixture of organic solvent and water.⁶ Reaction-based probes, such as those which rely upon fluoride-mediated cleavage of a Si–O bond, are irreversible and typically suffer from delayed acquisition times (10 min to several hours).^{1b, d}

Over the last decade, several emissive lanthanide (Ln) complexes have been developed that can report changes in the concentrations of various anions, including citrate, lactate and bicarbonate, through modulation of emission spectral form or lifetime of the complex.^{7,8} However, Ln-based sensors for fluoride are scarce because the binding affinity between fluoride and Ln ions is generally too weak ($\log K_{\text{a}} = 1.5-3$)^{8c,9}. One notable example involved the encapsulation of fluoride between two Eu complexes, resulting in a supramolecular dimer ($\log \beta = 13.0$).^{1e} In this case, the fluoride detection range was very low (0.2–50 μM), falling outside of the environmentally significant range (20–210 μM).

In this work, two water-soluble luminescent probes [Eu.L¹⁻²]⁺ are reported (Figure 1), each capable of binding and sensing fluoride in pure water samples, with minimal interference from other anions. Each probe is based on a C₂-symmetric mono-cationic europium complex, bearing two *trans*-related quinoline chromophores and a coordinated water molecule. Fluoride binds reversibly to each probe, displacing the coordinated water, resulting in a 9-fold

^a Department of Chemistry, Loughborough University, Leicestershire, LE11 3TU, UK.

† Electronic Supplementary Information (ESI): details of complex synthesis and characterisation, UV-Vis and fluorescence data are available. See DOI: 10.1039/x0xx00000x

enhancement in overall emission intensity and dramatic changes in emission spectral form (Figure 2). Complex $[\text{Eu.L}^1]^+$ represents one of very few probes capable of signalling the presence of fluoride within the range relevant to water fluoridation (20–210 μM),^{1a,d} and provides an instantaneous spectral readout signal.

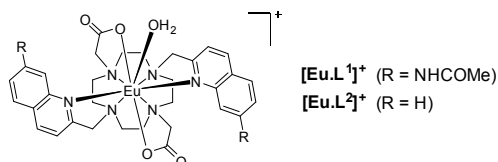


Figure 1. Structure of luminescent europium complexes $[\text{Eu.L}^{1-2}]^+$

Details of the synthesis of complexes $[\text{Eu.L}^{1-2}]^+$ are given in the supplementary information. Selected photophysical data for $[\text{Eu.L}^{1-2}]^+$ is provided in Table 1. The UV-Vis absorption spectrum of $[\text{Eu.L}^1]^+$ is composed of a broad featureless band centred at 332 nm, whereas the absorption spectrum of $[\text{Eu.L}^2]^+$ features a narrow band with a maximum at 318 nm (Fig. S1–S2, ESI). The emission spectra of $[\text{Eu.L}^{1-2}]^+$ in water (25 mM HEPES, pH 7.4) were similar, each characterised by at least three components in the $\Delta J = 1$ transition (585–605 nm), indicating that both complexes adopt structures of low symmetry in water (Figure 2a). In addition, the $\Delta J = 2$ transition (605–625 nm) is approximately equal in intensity to the $\Delta J = 4$ manifold (685–710 nm).

Table 1 Selected photophysical data for Eu complexes $[\text{Eu.L}^{1-2}]^+$ (H_2O , or as stated)

Complex	$\lambda_{\text{max}}/\text{nm}$	$\epsilon/\text{mM}^{-1}\text{cm}^{-1}$	$\phi_{\text{em}}/\%$ ^a	$\tau_{(\text{H}_2\text{O})}/\text{ms}$	$\tau_{(\text{D}_2\text{O})}/\text{ms}$	q ^b
$[\text{Eu.L}^1]^+$	332	12.5	7	0.49	1.38	1.2
$[\text{Eu.L}^2]^+$	318	11.8	23	0.51	1.37	1.1

^a Errors on quantum yields and lifetimes are $\pm 15\%$; ^b Values of hydration state, q ($\pm 20\%$) are derived using methods in ref 10.

To assess the ability of $[\text{Eu.L}^{1-2}]^+$ to signal the presence of different anions, the emission spectrum of $[\text{Eu.L}^1]^+$ (20 μM) was recorded in water (25 mM HEPES, pH 7.4) in the presence of a 100-fold excess of a range of anions (Figure 2). The addition of fluoride resulted in a 9-fold enhancement in the overall emission intensity of $[\text{Eu.L}^1]^+$, as well as substantial perturbations in the emission spectral form (Figure 2b). The limiting spectrum indicated the formation of one major fluoride-bound species, as defined by a single $\Delta J = 0$ transition at 579 nm and two intense components within the $\Delta J = 1$ transition, centred at 586 and 596 nm respectively. In addition, the relative intensity of the hypersensitive $\Delta J = 2$ transition centred at 617 nm increased by a factor of 15. The only other anion that induced a significant spectral response was bicarbonate. In the presence of HCO_3^- , the limiting spectrum of $[\text{Eu.L}^1]^+$ (Figure 2c) was distinctly different from that observed

with fluoride. Most notably, a larger ratio between the transitions $\Delta J=2 / \Delta J=1$ was observed. In contrast, all other anions typically present in water samples, including chloride, phosphate, sulfate and nitrate induced essentially no change ($<10\%$) in emission intensity or spectral form (Figure 2d). Complex $[\text{Eu.L}^2]^+$ also showed a selective spectral response to fluoride, giving rise to a smaller (3.5-fold) enhancement in overall emission intensity (Fig. S6).

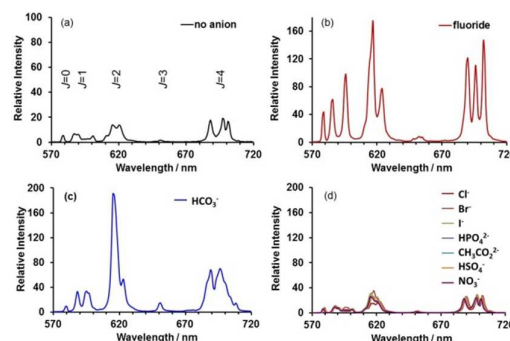


Figure 2. Comparison of the emission spectrum of (a) $[\text{Eu.L}^1]^+$ with the limiting emission spectra of $[\text{Eu.L}^1]^+$ in the presence of: (b) 2 mM fluoride; (c) 2 mM HCO_3^- ; and (d) 2 mM Cl^- , Br^- , I^- , HPO_4^{2-} , CH_3CO_2^- , HSO_4^- , NO_3^- (sodium salts). Conditions: H_2O (25 mM HEPES, pH 7.4), $\lambda_{\text{exc}} = 332 \text{ nm}$, 298 K.

Emission lifetimes of $[\text{Eu.L}^1]^+$ were measured in H_2O and D_2O in the presence of fluoride and were found to be similar ($\tau = 1.13$ and 1.67 ms respectively), compared to those measured in the absence of a coordinating anion ($\tau = 0.49$ and 1.38 ms). These results are consistent with a hydration state, q , of 1.2 in the absence of fluoride, and zero for the fluoride-bound species.¹⁰ Thus, added fluoride results in displacement of the coordinated water molecule from the probe. The addition of HCO_3^- resulted in a similar change in hydration state, whereas all other anions (e.g. Cl^- , Br^- , I^- , HPO_4^{2-} , CH_3CO_2^- , HSO_4^- , NO_3^-) did not displace the bound water molecule. A 1:1 binding mode between $[\text{Eu.L}^1]^+$ and fluoride was confirmed by high resolution mass spectrometric data; a major signal was observed at $m/z = 875.2302$ for the singly charged ternary complex $[\text{Eu.L}^1 + \text{F} + \text{Na}]^+$, in excellent agreement with the calculated isotopic distribution (Fig. S13).

An affinity constant was determined for fluoride binding by making incremental additions of NaF to a solution of $[\text{Eu.L}^1]^+$ (20 μM) at pH 7.4 (25 mM HEPES). The change in the emission intensity ratio, 596/615 nm, was measured as a function of anion concentration, and the data was analysed using a non-linear least squares curve-fitting procedure based on a 1:1 binding model (Fig. S4–5). $[\text{Eu.L}^1]^+$ was found to bind to fluoride with $\log K_a = 3.5 (\pm 0.1)$. Under the same conditions, $[\text{Eu.L}^1]^+$ showed a slightly weaker affinity for bicarbonate [$\log K_a = 3.0 (\pm 0.1)$]. To eliminate competitive binding to HCO_3^- entirely, a fluoride titration experiment was conducted at pH 6 using 25 mM MES buffer (at pH 6, residual HCO_3^- is readily

removed as CO₂) (Figure 3). Under these conditions, an affinity constant for the binding of fluoride to [Eu.L¹]⁺ was log K_a = 4.1 (±0.1). This is 5 times stronger than that determined at pH 7.4, reflecting the absence of HCO₃⁻ at lower pH. Complex [Eu.L²]⁺, which lacks acetamide groups, showed slightly weaker binding to fluoride (log K_a = 3.5 ±0.1) under the same conditions.

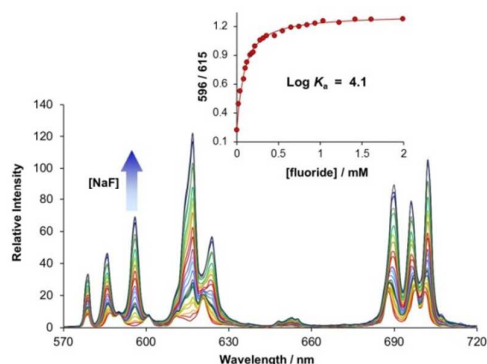


Figure 3. Change in emission spectra of [Eu.L¹]⁺ (20 μM) as a function of added NaF. Conditions: H₂O (25 mM MES, pH 6.0), λ_{exc} = 332 nm, 298 K. The inset shows the fit to the experimental data, for log K_a = 4.1 (±0.1).

The affinity of [Eu.L¹⁻²]⁺ for fluoride is substantially higher than that of previously reported Ln-F systems. This can be ascribed to a synergistic effect between Eu(III) coordination and additional hydrogen bonding interactions to the electron deficient quinoline units. A molecular model of [Eu.L²]⁺ with a coordinated fluoride ion [optimised at B3LYP/3-21G* with the Gaussian 09 package, using water as solvent]¹² indicated that the bound fluoride can form two short C-H...F⁻ contacts with each of the quinoline units (Figure 4). The average C-H...F⁻ distance is 2.81 Å, with an average H...F⁻ distance of 1.88 Å. Both C-H...F⁻ angles are acceptably linear (avg. angle is 141°).¹³ It is hypothesised that these bifurcated C-H...F...H-C contacts significantly stabilise the metal-bound fluoride. Such interactions would also restrict rotation of the quinoline N–Eu bonds, thus stabilising a single diastereomer, consistent with that observed in the Eu emission spectrum.

The dramatic changes in Eu emission spectral form of [Eu.L¹⁻²]⁺ observed in the presence of fluoride are indicative of alteration of the Eu(III) metal coordination environment. To probe this change further, the effect of fluoride on the ¹H NMR spectrum of [Eu.L¹]⁺ was investigated in D₂O (pD 6.4). In the absence of added fluoride, two sets of proton resonances were clearly discernible in the ¹H NMR spectrum for [Eu.L¹]⁺, consistent with the presence of two diastereomers in solution (Figure 5). The addition of 1 eq. of NaF resulted in the appearance of a new set of resonances corresponding to the fluoride-bound species, in slow exchange with the original hydrated complex on the NMR timescale. In the presence of excess NaF (5 eq.), the original signals disappeared and only signals for the fluoride-bound complex remained. The number

of apparent signals had halved compared to the hydrated complex, indicating that a single fluoride-bound species had formed. Coordination of fluoride was also observed in the ¹⁹F NMR spectra, which showed a resonance at -123 ppm for unbound fluoride, and the emergence of a second signal at -474 ppm, corresponding to fluoride bound at the Eu metal centre (Fig. S11).

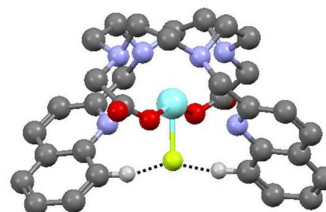


Figure 4. An optimised structure of [Eu.L²]⁺ with a coordinated fluoride ion, stabilised by two short C-H...F contacts (avg. C-H...F distance is 2.81 Å, avg. C-H...F angle is 141°). The model geometry was optimised at B3LYP/3-21G* (Gaussian 09 package) using the crystal structure of a Eu complex reported in ref. 14 as a starting point.

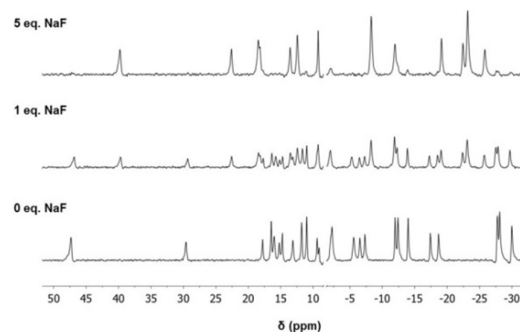


Figure 5. ¹H NMR spectra of [Eu.L¹]⁺ (2.4 mM) upon addition of NaF (0–5 eq.). Measured in D₂O (pD 6.4, 298 K).

The remarkable sensitivity of the probe was demonstrated by plotting the emission intensity ratio, 596/601 nm, as a function of added NaF in the concentration range 0–260 μM (Figure 6). The plot showed very good linearity ($R^2 = 0.9949$) within this range. Notably, a 200% enhancement in the intensity ratio was obtained after the addition of 260 μM NaF. Competitive binding studies revealed that [Eu.L¹⁻²]⁺ can detect low micromolar levels of fluoride with essentially no interference from other anions typically found in drinking water (e.g. Cl⁻, HPO₄²⁻, NO₃⁻ and SO₄²⁻), even when present in high concentrations (5 mM) (Fig. S9). Thus, [Eu.L¹]⁺ represents one of the most sensitive probes for the selective determination of fluoride levels in drinking water.

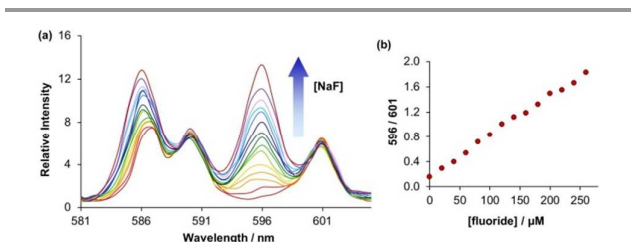


Figure 6. (a) Change in emission spectral form of $[\text{Eu.L}^1]^+$ (20 μM) within the $\Delta\lambda = 1$ manifold (580–605 nm), as a function of added NaF (0–260 μM). (b) linear increase in the emission intensity ratio, 596/601 nm, in the range relevant for water fluoridation. Conditions: H_2O (25 mM MES, pH 6.0), $\lambda_{\text{exc}} = 332$ nm, 25 $^\circ\text{C}$.

To validate the practicable utility of probe $[\text{Eu.L}^1]^+$, tap water samples buffered at pH 6 (25 mM MES) were spiked with known concentrations of NaF. The amount of fluoride was measured by comparing the recorded emission spectra with the calibration curve in Figure 6 (Table 2). The results obtained using $[\text{Eu.L}^1]^+$ were in close agreement with the expected fluoride levels, with a maximal percentage variation of 7%. The results were also compared to those obtained independently using a fluoride-selective electrode (FSE); both analytical methods showed very good agreement.

Table 2 Measurement of fluoride ion concentration in spiked tap water samples, using $[\text{Eu.L}^1]^+$ and a fluoride-selective electrode (FSE).

Spiked $[\text{F}^-]$	$[\text{F}^-] / \mu\text{M}$ using $[\text{Eu.L}^1]^+$ ^a	% variation ^b	$[\text{F}^-] / \mu\text{M}$ using FSE ^a
30	36 (± 6)	3.0	35 (± 3)
65	65 (± 4)	7.0	68 (± 3)
115	113 (± 4)	6.0	111 (± 4)
160	154 (± 6)	6.5	165 (± 4)
210	204 (± 8)	5.0	212 (± 4)

^a Values are the mean average of two independent measurements; ^b calculated based on an initial F^- ion concentration of 5 μM .

In summary, two luminescent europium complexes $[\text{Eu.L}^{1-2}]^+$ have been synthesised, each capable of selective binding to fluoride in water in the 20–260 μM range. Such strong binding to fluoride can be attributed to a synergistic effect between Eu metal coordination and two stabilising C–H \cdots F $^-$ interactions. $[\text{Eu.L}^1]^+$ was used for the quantitative determination of fluoride ions in drinking water samples, within the range relevant to water fluoridation (20–210 μM). These results establish Eu complexes as effective probes for fluoride analysis, offering advantages over traditional methods, including a rapid spectral readout signal. In addition, the ligand structure can be readily modified to modulate the steric demand at the Eu(III) metal centre, thus tuning anion affinity to the target concentration range.

Acknowledgement

SJB wishes to thank the Ramsay Memorial Fellowship Trust for funding, Dr Alan Kenwright and Dr Nicola Rodgers for help with NMR studies and Dr Mark Fox for molecular modelling studies.

References

- a) R. Hu, J. Feng, D. Hu, S. Wang, S. Li, Y. Li and G. Yang, *Angew. Chem. Int. Ed.*, 2010, **49**, 4915–4918; b) S. Y. Kim, J. Park, M. Koh, S. B. Park and J.-I. Hong, *Chem. Commun.*, 2009, 4735–4737; c) S. Rochat and K. Severin, *Chem. Commun.*, 2011, **47**, 4391–4393; d) F. Zheng, F. Zeng, C. Yu, X. Hou and S. Wu, *Chem. Eur. J.*, 2013, **19**, 936–942; e) T. Liu, A. Nonat, M. Beyler, M. Regueiro-Figueroa, K. Nchimi Nono, O. Jeannin, F. Camerel, F. Debaene, S. Cianféran-Sanglier, R. Tripiet, C. Platas-Iglesias and L. J. Charbonnière, *Angew. Chem. Int. Ed.*, 2014, **53**, 7259–7263.
- a) J. F. Zhang, C. S. Lim, S. Bhuniya, B. R. Cho and J. S. Kim, *Org. Lett.*, 2011, **13**, 1190–1193; b) F. Han, Y. Bao, Z. Yang, T. M. Fyles, J. Zhao, X. Peng, Y. Wu and S. Sun, *Chem. Eur. J.*, 2007, **13**, 2880–2892; c) M. Boiocchi, L. Del Boca, D. E. Gómez, L. Fabbrizzi, M. Licchelli and E. Monzani, *J. Am. Chem. Soc.*, 2004, **126**, 16507–16514; d) M. Vázquez, L. Fabbrizzi, A. Taglietti, R. M. Pedrido, A. M. González-Noya and M. R. Bermejo, *Angew. Chem. Int. Ed.*, 2004, **43**, 1962–1965.
- a) S. Guha and S. Saha, *J. Am. Chem. Soc.*, 2010, **132**, 17674–17677; b) X. Cao, W. Lin, Q. Yu and J. Wang, *Org. Lett.*, 2011, **13**, 6098–6101; c) E. Quinlan, S. E. Matthews and T. Gunnlaugsson, *J. Org. Chem.*, 2007, **72**, 7497–7503.
- S. J. M. Koskela, T. M. Fyles and T. D. James, *Chem. Commun.*, 2005, 945–947.
- a) X. Jiang, M. C. Vieweger, J. C. Bollinger, B. Dragnea and D. Lee, *Org. Lett.*, 2007, **9**, 3579–3582; b) C. R. Wade, I.-S. Ke and F. P. Gabbai, *Angew. Chem.*, 2012, **124**, 493–496.
- a) Y. Kim and F. P. Gabbai, *J. Am. Chem. Soc.*, 2009, **131**, 3363–3369; b) P. Sokkalingam and C.-H. Lee, *J. Org. Chem.*, 2011, **76**, 3820–3828; c) T. Nishimura, S.-Y. Xu, Y.-B. Jiang, J. S. Fossey, K. Sakurai, S. D. Bull and T. D. James, *Chem. Commun.*, 2013, **49**, 478–480; d) M. J. Langton, O. A. Blackburn, T. Lang, S. Faulkner and P. D. Beer, *Angew. Chem. Int. Ed.*, 2014, **53**, 11463–11466.
- S. J. Butler and D. Parker, *Chem. Soc. Rev.*, 2013, **42**, 1652–1666.
- a) R. Pal, D. Parker and L. C. Costello, *Org. Biomol. Chem.*, 2009, **7**, 1525–1528; b) D. G. Smith, G.-I. Law, B. S. Murray, R. Pal, D. Parker and K.-L. Wong, *Chem. Commun.*, 2011, **47**, 7347–7349; c) S. J. Butler, B. K. McMahon, R. Pal, D. Parker and J. W. Walton, *Chem. Eur. J.*, 2013, **19**, 9511–9517.
- L. S. M. Lima, A. Lecointre, J.-F. Morfin, A. de Blas, D. Visvikis, L. C. J. Charbonnière, C. Platas-Iglesias and R. Tripiet, *Inorg. Chem.*, 2011, **50**, 12508–12521.
- A. Beeby, I. M. Clarkson, R. S. Dickins, S. Faulkner, D. Parker, L. Royle, A. S. de Sousa, J. A. Gareth Williams and M. Woods, *J. Chem. Soc., Perkin Trans. 2*, 1999, 493–504.
- The concentration of HCO_3^- in water rises with increased pH. A pH titration revealed that the emission spectral profile of $[\text{Eu.L}^1]^+$ did not change at all within pH range 3.5–7.0 (where the level of HCO_3^- is negligible), but was sensitive to the increased amount of HCO_3^- present in the pH range 7.1–8.5 (Fig. S3).
- Energy minimised structures were determined using the polarised continuum solvent model (PCM), using water as solvent.
- A search of the CCDC database reveals four examples of Ln complexes with a coordinated fluoride ion, and intramolecular C–H \cdots F $^-$ contacts shorter than 3.1 Å. e.g. A. C. Hillier, Zhang, G. H. Maunder, S. Y. Liu, T. A. Eberspacher, M. V. Metz, R. McDonald, A. Domingos, N. Marques, V. W. Day, A. Sella and J. Takats, *Inorg. Chem.*, 2001, **40**, 5106–5116.
- S. Aime, A. S. Batsanov, M. Botta, J. A. K. Howard, M. P. Lowe, D. Parker, *New. J. Chem.*, 1999, **23**, 669–670.

