

NERC Council Meeting

Summary of discussions

10 March 2016

Wroughton, Swindon

Members present:

Sir Anthony Cleaver (Chair), Mr N Folland, Ms L Heasman, Professor AL Heathwaite, Professor EA Hill, Mr I Khan, Professor G Orpen, Professor DIA Poll, Mr IR Simm, Ms C Tacon, , Professor DJ Wingham (Chief Executive), Professor L Yellowlees.

Apologies: Professor IL Boyd, Ms J Davenport, Mr PJ Fox (NERC Chief Operating Officer), Professor Dame Georgina Mace, Professor Dame Julia Slingo, Lord Willis, Ms S Ellis.

Representative of the Secretary of State: Apologies sent.

NERC Directors: Professor T Wheeler (Director of Science and Innovation), Ms A Robinson (Director of Corporate Affairs and Change Management).

Other attendees: Professor N Brown (TAG Chair), Mr N Bird (Director of Finance), Ms H Collins (Head of Corporate Planning), Professor A Hatton (SB Chair), Dr P Heads (Associate Director, Strategy and Evidence), Mr RSzadziewski (Head of the GRO Programme), Ms K Tearall (Head of Skills and Careers).

Secretary: Dr AJ Turner.

Key issues discussed

Honours

NERC Council noted that the environmental science community had been recognised in the last round of honours awards and congratulated Council member Professor Dame Georgina Mace, BAS staff member Emily Shuckburgh OBE and former Council member Rowan Douglas CBE, on their awards. They also congratulated Professor Sir Paul Curran, a former member of Council. Council recorded its congratulations to Professor Steve Smith of Bristol University who received a Queen's Anniversary prize for his work in volcanology, working to improve resilience to volcanic hazards.

Doctoral Training Partnerships (DTPs)

Council welcomed a presentation from Professor Nigel Brown outlining the purpose of the shift over the past few years to develop the new approach of Doctoral Training Partnerships (DTPs) and Centres for Doctoral Training (CDTs). Council noted that this approach had been largely welcomed and seemed to be proving successful despite an initial workload by all involved to move to this new, more student-focused approach. Council approved the plans and

approach to commence a full evaluation of the DTPs schemes, noting this was an essential step in ensuring the next round of commissioning was informed by lessons learnt as well as the successes of this first tranche of DTPs.

Council retreat summary

On Wednesday 9 March, Council was joined by the Chairs of its advisory boards and the NERC Executive Board non-executive directors for its annual 'away day' or retreat. The purpose of the day was to take some time for in-depth discussion to inform Council's decision making over the coming year. The retreat had two sessions: the first looking at the spending review and the second considering NERC's approach to communications and public engagement. Council reviewed a summary of the discussion at its meeting.

Spending Review

Council reviewed the summary of its considerations of the NERC spending review allocations. Council welcomed the spending review settlement, recognising that with the inclusion of Global Challenges allocation it was a real terms settlement, and one that provided significant opportunity for the environmental sciences community within the UK to share their expertise in answering ODA challenges. Council spent time at the retreat considering how NERC may need to re-balance its expenditure to recognise the new opportunities within the allocation, and asked the executive to progress this work for its next meeting in May. Council also asked the executive to look at ways to engage with the NERC community to help them prepare for the emerging opportunities that will be offered by the Global Challenges Research Fund.

Council noted that development of a new Delivery Plan continues, with more information and emerging clarity about the direction of travel for ensuring collective working across Councils. The recommendations of the Nurse review are now endorsed by Government and there is a BIS focus area to develop the policy framework for implementing this reform.

Communications and public engagement

Council reviewed the summary of the retreat discussion sessions focusing on communicating NERC's role and purpose, and fulfilling the Royal Charter duty to encourage public awareness and dialogue in environmental science. Council welcomed increased attention, focus and effort in both areas, noting the different purposes of each session and asked for the discussions to be used to inform detailed planning and reporting on progress at future meetings.

Chief Executive update

Council received an update on the process for naming the new Polar Research Ship, noting that a public call for ideas would commence from 17 March. A naming panel was in the process of being convened to consider the ideas and recommend a name for the new ship. Council noted that the next key milestone for the ship building would be the keel laying, and this would be marked with a formal event at Cammell Laird in Merseyside in October 2016. Council was advised that this would coincide with a visit to Liverpool by the RRS Discovery and events were being planned to showcase NERC's science and innovation in the North

West region. Council also noted significant positive media coverage of BBC weatherman Peter Gibbs recent visit to the Rothera and Halley bases in the Antarctic.

Finance and risk report

Council received a detailed finance report which indicated a projected balanced financial position for the 2015/16 financial year. Council also received an update on financial matters for the upcoming period, and planning for the new financial year. The Chair of the Audit and Risk Assurance Committee (ARAC) outlined the headline risks from the corporate risk register.

Governance, Responsibility and Ownership (GRO) programme

Council received an update on the Governance, Responsibility and Ownership (GRO) programme of work. GRO is the NERC programme to consider the future ownership and governance of NERC's research centres. Council noted more detailed planning being done to proceed towards decision 'Gateways' in line with Government project good practice, with the Audit and Risk Assurance Committee (ARAC) providing detailed scrutiny of processes and risks. After discussion to ensure clarity of the ARAC role, Council confirmed it was satisfied with the approach and role of ARAC in providing assurance about this process. Council also noted that the executive continued to engage Department of Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) officials in developing this process to the next stage.

Reports will continue to be presented to future Council meetings as this programme of work progresses.

Future planning of marine national capability

Professor Hill from the National Oceanography Centre (NOC) outlined for Council the NOC's proposed priorities and directions for marine National Capability, proving leadership for NERC's marine portfolio.

Professor Hill outlined for Council the societal drivers and the key science issues for marine science, emphasising the natural and anthropogenic-induced variability within oceans at a range of space and time scales, and the importance of taking a global approach to identifying and understanding trends. The ocean is a major part of the global carbon cycle and is the biggest reservoir of global carbon. Understanding changes in the ocean will give us greater insight into securing natural resources, protecting the ocean's productive capacity, increasing resilience to marine related natural disasters, and making sense of global change and variability. Council agreed that NERC's new coordinated approach to marine NC will result in a more focused approach to research and development, and use of technology, to address key questions at the crucial basin-decadal space-time scale. The aim of this is to ensure that the UK will be better positioned to contribute to the global science endeavour in those areas where we have outstanding, distinctive strengths. Current advances promise a technological revolution that will change our understanding of how the oceans work, and Professor Hill emphasised the role of the UK in this future.

NERC funding of Royal Charter duty to encourage public engagement and dialogue

Council agreed a dedicated funding line of £0.5m per year to fulfil the NERC Royal Charter obligation for public engagement with environmental science, and requested an update at the next Council meeting. Council asked for a further update on public engagement at its next meeting, including plans for NERC public engagement as well as evaluation of activity.

Standing items

Council noted a number of standing items including the rolling programme of business, and reports of the Science Board meeting of 3-4 February and the ARAC meeting of 15 December 2015.

Date and time of next meeting

The next NERC Council meeting will be held on 19 May 2016.