

NERC Council Meeting

Summary of discussions

14 July 2016

Met Office, Exeter

Members present:

Sir A Cleaver (Chair), Mr N Folland, Ms L Heasman, Professor AL Heathwaite, Mr I Khan, Dame GM Mace, Professor G Orpen, Professor DIA Poll, Mr IR Simm, Dame J Slingso, Professor DJ Wingham (Chief Executive), Lord Willis, Professor L Yellowlees.

Apologies: Professor IL Boyd, Professor N Brown (TAB Chair), Ms J Davenport, Ms C Tacon, Dr S Ellis.

Representative of the Secretary of State: Ms J Dibden.

NERC Directors (Head Office and Centres): Mr PJ Fox (Chief Operating Officer), Professor Ed Hill (Director, NOC), Ms A Robinson (Director of Corporate Affairs and Change Management), Professor T Wheeler (Director of Science and Innovation).

Other attendees: Dr S Davies (IAB Chair), Professor A Hatton (SB Chair), Ms H Jevon (Associate Director, Funding Operations & Research), Dr S Laurie (Head of Innovation and Translation).

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 Professor Alan Thorpe, a former NERC Chief Executive, Professor John Ludden, Professor Nicholas Veck, Dr Martin Smith, Dr John Gordon, on their awards. Council recorded its congratulations to Dame Julia Slingso, NERC Council member, who received the World Meteorological Organization's top award, the IMO Prize, for her outstanding contribution to climate science. Dame Julia is the 60th IMO laureate.

Global Challenges Research Fund (GCRF)

Council received an overview of developments in establishing the Global Challenges Research Fund, with themes for calls in development, with a build to increasing emphasis and activity over time. Council welcomed initial efforts to engage the community with this new focus and fund, noting a series of Town Hall meetings recently and NERC efforts to engage its community, for instance through the recent Heads of Department meeting and establishing internal processes to ensure NERC science contribution in this arena.

Chief Executive update

Council spent some time being advised on potential issues, concerns and developments following the result of the EU referendum. Council agreed that there were two key areas of risk for NERC and welcomed efforts to clarify any potential funding exposure. Council also welcomed work across Research Councils to inform potential risks to the UK skills-base from losing access to a wider pool of talented scientists, if freedom of movement across the EU were to mean restrictions on scientific research posts.

Update from Department of Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS)

Ms Dibden provided Council with an update on progress of the Higher Education and Research Bill, noting the second reading was scheduled for 19 July 2016. The interim Chair of UK Research and Innovation, John Kingman, started on 4 July. Ms Dibden noted that BIS were waiting to understand the implications of a new Government, and possible changes to the machinery of Government, as well as to clarify the processes to commence 'Brexit'. She thanked Research Councils for feeding in issues and areas of risk and welcomed ongoing assistance to inform future planning. Ms Dibden then advised Council that there had been good progress in joint working between BIS and NERC to progress the GRO programme, developing business cases and an agreed timetable for decision-making.

Finance and risk report

Council received a finance report which provided early indicators of trajectories for the 2016/17 financial year. The Chair of the Audit and Risk Assurance Committee (ARAC) outlined the headline risks from the corporate risk register, noting that additional risks around the result of the EU referendum.

Corporate Plan

Council welcomed the introduction of the new NERC Corporate Plan to coordinate activity led by NERC Head Office over each financial year. Council welcomed the Plan as a way of ensuring a direct cascade of objectives from the NERC Strategy and the Delivery Plan into the Corporate Plan, and from there more detailed directorate and team planning.

Council agreed the following priorities identified in the Corporate Plan for 2016-17:

- ODA (Official Development Assistance) and engagement in the Global Challenges Research Fund (GCRF).
- Deliver the Governance, Responsibility and Ownership (GRO) programme.
- Build approaches to communications and stakeholder engagement and implement the new NERC public engagement programme.
- Deliver against agreed programmes of work for capital projects including the new polar ship, the Halley move, ESIOS etc.
- Organisational change projects: external change projects (moving to UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) etc.) and NERC internal reform.
- To move to a more effective system of commissioning Marine NC, and establish the land surface modelling capability required to underpin integrated UK flood forecasting.

Council noted also that the Corporate Plan would now also drive reporting, providing a coherent basis for assessing progress of key activities.

NERC Executive Governance changes

Council agreed to revise internal management and governance arrangements to ensure these remain fit-for-purpose for NERC as a commissioner of research. These changes will see the establishment of a National Capability Partners Forum which will be the primary forum for engaging NERC Centres and others who are part of the broader National Capability commissioning process; and a subsequent re-focusing of NERC management through a re-cast Management Board that will focus on NERC's commissioning role. Centre Assurance Boards will also be established to ensure robust oversight of each of NERC's Centres. Council noted that the changes in governance will commence in September 2016.

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 significant progress had been made in partnership with officials at the Department of Business, Innovation and Skills, with work progressing on Ministerial briefings and business cases. Council also received assurance of progress from the GRO Committee who continue to provide detailed scrutiny of processes and risks. Reports will continue to be presented to future Council meetings as this programme of work progresses.

Managing the transition to UKRI

Council noted a paper outlining the planning and actions in hand to seek to manage the range of change currently facing NERC including to support effective transition for NERC and the Research Councils collectively to the proposed new body, UK Research and Innovation (UKRI). Council noted that the programme of work to bring about UKRI was being managed from BIS, and was on a path to increasing clarity, with the Bill progressing through Parliament. Council also noted that NERC was facing change from other drivers, including the transfer of functions from UKSBS, the BIS2020 programme of work and changes to implement the outcomes of the last spending review, as well as the changes in the machinery of Government and the implications of leaving the EU following the referendum. Council agreed that there were risks to delivery, noting that ARAC were alive to these issues and would continue to provide assurance to Council, and asked to be kept informed of developments, recognising the importance of supporting the scientific community and NERC staff through these changes to ensure effective delivery and to retain a focus on NERC's world-class science and innovation.

Focus on Innovation Advisory Board (IAB)

Council welcomed a paper and presentation on recent developments in the Innovation Advisory Board, following changes in governance and new leadership, with a new Chair, Dr Stewart Davies, taking up post. Council noted that Dr Davies, in line with the revised Terms of Reference for IAB, would attend Council. Professor Wheeler and Dr Davies

outlined a range of areas for focus for Innovation within NERC, with an aim of increasing impact through use of different routes, working with business, and a broader sense of ambition. Council requested an update on progress at a future meeting.

Communicating NERC and its science

Council considered a paper and presentation that shared progress, current challenges and future plans to communicate NERC and its science to key audiences. This included a summary of progress in delivering against the recommendations of the Cabinet Office communications capability review of NERC (Mar 2015). Council congratulated the NERC Communications team for first class progress and welcomed the new approach to using themes to bring to life NERC science for a wider audience. Council members noted they had felt a change of tone and positivity in NERC communications, starting with the Discovery in London event and also as part of the naming of the polar ship. Council also recognised the importance of internal communications, with recent improvements providing a sound basis for assisting to manage the volume of change the organisation was facing.

New polar research vessel

Council was advised that the new polar vessel project continued good progress, with the ship now named the RRS Sir David Attenborough, and construction having commenced. The next highlight would be the keel laying ceremony for the ship in October 2016. Council noted that the project had been recently reviewed as part of the Infrastructure Project Authority standard practice for large capital projects, and had received a very positive rating, giving further assurance that the project is well-managed and on track.

Standing items

Council also noted a number of standing items including the rolling programme of business, and a report of the Innovation Advisory Board of 24 May 2015, the Audit and Risk Assurance Committee meeting of 26 May 2016, the Training Advisory Board meeting of 6 June and the Science Board meeting of 15-16 June.

Science Board: Strategic programme areas recommendation

Council agreed funding for one strategic programme area (RoSES) based on the recommendation of the Science Board from its June meeting and sought clarifications in connection with a second. Council also agreed the approach to communications of this decision. Council discussed the process with the Chair of the Science Board and were assured that the process was robust, and noted that the limitations of funding meant that some proposals had not been funded, and agreed with the considerations of the Science Board in coming to that conclusion.

Date and time of next meeting

The next NERC Council meeting will be held on 20 October 2016.