

NERC Council Meeting

Summary of discussions

7 December 2016

Lancaster Environment Centre, Lancaster University

Members present:

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

Apologies: Ms J Davenport, Mr I Khan, Ms C Tacon, Dr S Davies (IAB Chair).

Representative of the Secretary of State: Ms J Dibden.

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

Other attendees: Professor A Hatton (SB Chair), Professor Stephen Mobbs (Director, NCAS).

Secretary: Dr AJ Turner.

Key issues discussed

Chief Executive update

Council spent some time looking at issues of internal employee engagement and morale in the context of UKRI, the UK EU referendum, and the flow through to Centres of the recent spending review settlement. Council noted that a roadshow was being planned by the NERC executive to allow a chance for people across NERC to engage with these key areas of change. Council also noted and discussed a report detailing NERC's investigation of an anonymous complaint letter.

Council also noted the success of the Manchester-based aspects of the Into the Blue showcase, noting it had attracted over 1000 people per day, with additional media coverage. Council also noted significant progress in a number of key projects including the funding of 29 foundation projects between NERC, ESRC and AHRC under the 'Building resilience' call of the Global Challenges Research Fund (GCRF), the Bellagio convening of the Towards a Sustainable Earth initiative (TaSE) with the US Rockefeller Foundation, a successful IIASA-NERC conference at the Royal Society, and the announcement of the Environmental Science impact programme which made two awards for research organisations (led by the Universities of Exeter and Leeds) to work together with businesses, policy bodies and other actors to deliver regional impact from NERC environmental science.

Council also noted that constructive dialogue was taking place with officials in BEIS in relation to working through the technology basis to ensure UKRI is fit-for-purpose from day one, and that NERC continued to work with Government to inform it as to the potential impact and opportunities of BREXIT for environmental science.

Finance and risk report

Council received a finance report which set out the broadly balanced financial position for 2016/17. Council noted the internal processes in place to provide active management of NERC finances and assurance of any issues, for instance unplanned variances. Council then turned to the risk report and agreed that the format of the new-look risk register was clear and effective, and an improvement on the former risk register. Council noted that each Centre has its own risk register, which feeds into an assurance process and links to the top risk register. It was agreed that ARAC [spell out?] would look at the flow of top risks from the Centre's to Council's risk register, and check the process was working smoothly.

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

Ms Dibden thanked the NERC executive for its contributions to the Autumn Statement and the building pool of evidence available to BEIS to make a strong case across Government for continued investment in science and research. Council welcomed the announcement in the recent Autumn statement of up to an additional £2bn per year for science R&D by 2020, and discussed the opportunities and impacts of this new investment within the environmental science context. Ms Dibden also provided Council with an update on progress of the Higher Education and Research Bill, noting the Bill has progressed to the House of Lords. She thanked Research Councils for feeding in issues and areas of risk in regards to both UKRI transition planning and Brexit issues and welcomed ongoing assistance to inform future planning.

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 ongoing talks to progress this activity with officials at BEIS, with work progressing on Ministerial briefings and business cases, both for NERC Centres and the Hadley Centre. Council also noted progress around governance in relation to the National Centre for Atmospheric Science (NCAS) noting the different, collaborative form of that Centre, based out of Leeds University. Reports will continue to be presented to future Council meetings as this programme of work progresses.

Future of hydrology national capability

Council discussed a paper aimed at ensuring continued support for hydrology national capability within NERC in order to maintain the UK as a world leader in terrestrial hydrology as well as weather and climate science and associated modelling. Council agreed a set of initiatives to support and enhance current efforts in this area, including that of the NERC / Met Office Joint UK Land Environment Simulator (JULES) (a community land surface model) and the UK Environment Prediction (UKEP) project. Council asked for a further report at a future meeting to highlight progress.

NERC environmental management

Council considered a paper outlining a proposal to introduce new measures to bring increased focus and reduced environmental impact over the long term to NERC operations, with the intention to bring to life NERC's corporate responsibility approach 'Responsible Business'. Council agreed to broader reporting to include NERC's full carbon footprint in the Annual Report, and detailed mapping to understand the current footprint of NERC's activities. Council asked for an opportunity to explore potential options in more detail at the Council retreat in March.

Update on data commissioning

Council were given a detailed presentation setting out a proposal for bringing together NERC's existing investments in Data Centres, research and innovation activities to create a unified NERC

Environmental Data Service. The aim is to make it easier to provide cross-sector, cross-discipline data to users whilst maintaining discipline-specific expertise in NERC's core data function and to provide an enhanced service to current data users and engage with under-represented sectors. Council supported the proposed approach noting that this approach would build on interaction and integration with other existing major activities (e.g. Copernicus, ECMWF, cross-Research Council and the Turin Institute) and that support from experienced data professional would be required.

The future of the UK Antarctic gateway

Council were introduced to NERC's planned 'UK Antarctic Deep Field Gateway' project, This a large capital investment that includes modernisation of UK Antarctic infrastructure and logistics capability to support science for 2020 and beyond. Council noted the change was driven by a new polar science strategy; the new polar ship RRS Sir David Attenborough; redevelopment of Rothera research station; capabilities of the new aircraft; and the new Halley 7 research station. The overall plan would stretch beyond the present CSR period, and Council noted that further discussions with BEIS would be needed to implement the plan in its entirety.

Council approved the outline business case, noting the opportunity to increase efficiency by replacing now outdated infrastructure, and also ensure the environmental impact of particularly the UK Antarctic presence is reduced and actively managed. Council asked for and received assurance that efforts were being made to reduce the overall cost and ensure the process was as efficient as possible, noting some of the challenges of working in a remote and hostile environment.

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 27 October 2016.

Date and time of next meeting

The next NERC Council meeting will be held on 2 March 2017.