

NERC Council Meeting

Summary of discussions

2 March 2017

Alexandra House, Swindon

Members present:

Professor IL Boyd, Sir A Cleaver (Chair), Mr N Folland, Ms L Heasman, Professor AL Heathwaite, Mr I Khan, Professor G Orpen, Professor DIA Poll, Mr IR Simm, Ms C Tacon, Professor DJ Wingham (Chief Executive), Lord Willis, Professor L Yellowlees.

Apologies: Ms J Davenport, Dame GM Mace.

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), Mr PJ Fox (NERC Chief Operating Officer).

Other attendees: Dame J Slingo, Professor A Hatton (SB Chair), Dr S Davies (IAB Chair).

Secretary: Dr AJ Turner.

Key issues discussed

Chair's introduction

The NERC Chair, Sir Anthony Cleaver, welcomed members present and began by offering Council's congratulations to NERC colleagues who had been recognised in the New Year's Honours: Professor Jane Francis, director of the British Antarctic Survey (BAS), who was awarded Dame Commander of the Most Distinguished Order of Saint Michael & Saint George (DCMG); Professor Michael Depledge, Chair of environment & human health, University of Exeter Medical School, and Professor John Pyle, Professor of chemistry and holder of 1920 Chair for physical chemistry, Cambridge University, who were both awarded a CBE; and Professor David Vaughan, glaciologist at the British Antarctic Survey, who was awarded an OBE.

Council also offered its sincere thanks and best wishes to Dame Julia Slingo, who has reached the end of her term with NERC Council.

Council retreat summary

NERC Council retreat was held on 1 March 2017. Members of NERC's Science Board, Innovation Advisory Board, Training Advisory Board, non-executive members of NERC Management Board and Centre Directors joined council members in sessions designed to allow broader consideration of issues that are likely to come back to Council and other Boards in the forthcoming year.

Council invited Sir John Kingman to speak to the plenary session about the establishment of UK Research and Innovation, and agreed this was a useful way of setting context and sharing information. This was followed by four discussion sessions, focusing on: reform of research

centre funding; BGS relationship with NERC; the role of environmental science in supporting the industrial strategy; and NERC environmental management.

Chief Executive update

Council heard specific updates on the establishment of UKRI, Industrial Strategy, focused work to ensure NERC is part of the Industrial Strategy Challenges Fund, and ongoing engagement around issues arising from Brexit. The NERC Chief Executive also included some details of his recent visits to NERC Centres, designed to provide an opportunity for NERC staff to engage with some of these broader issues.

Council welcomed an update on the move of the Halley VI Antarctic research station, noting the success of the move and the positive work done on communicating the need for the move and the need to prioritise the safety of staff by closing the base for the upcoming winter season.

Council also noted that constructive dialogue was taking place with officials in BEIS in relation to working through the next stages of the Governance, Responsibility and Ownership (GRO) programme (see *GRO section below*).

Finance and risk report

Council received a finance report which set out a broadly balanced financial position for 2016/17. Council then turned to the risk report and noted that the top risks had informed both the topics for Council retreat and the agenda for the Council meeting itself.

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

Ms Dibden thanked the NERC executive for its contributions to the Global Challenges Research Fund, Industrial Strategy Challenges Fund and the ongoing discussions about the Autumn Statement investment in science and innovation, particularly through building the pool of evidence available to BEIS. Ms Dibden also provided Council with an update on progress of the Higher Education and Research Bill, noting the Bill has been subject to strong and positive scrutiny in the House of Lords leading to amendments that, for instance, will enshrine the Haldane principle in the Bill itself. 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.

NERC Head Office Plan

Council received a review of progress in delivering against the 2016/17 NERC annual corporate plan, noting that the introduction of this approach had succeeded in providing a focal point to resolve issues and ensure progress for key change projects across NERC Head Office. Council agreed that this approach should continue, with one request to re-name the plan the Head Office plan, to ensure clarity of purpose and ease of communication. Council agreed the NERC Head Office plan priorities for the coming year:

- Set up UKRI for success
- Articulate NERC's environmental science offer to UKRI and beyond
- Secure the future of NERC research centres

- Evaluate and commission national capability (NC)
- Sustain strong NERC influence and profile
- Run an effective and efficient organisation

Finally, Council noted it would receive six-monthly reports against progress.

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 continuing to progress business cases for NERC Centres. Council also agreed the timetable for key decision points, and noted these would for instance be informed by its gateway review process. Reports will continue to be presented to future Council meetings as this programme of work progresses.

Review of demand management

NERC implemented new measures in 2015 designed to raise discovery science standard grant success rates. Council heard a report of a recent review of the demand management measures using data from three grant rounds under demand management plus a survey of 20 research organisations. The review found that the introduction of demand management had improved success rates from 11-13% to 20% in the most recent round, because of a reduction in the number of poor quality proposals submitted. Council noted that there was no consistent difference in success rates between male and female submitters. The number of new investigators who had submitted proposals had fallen considerably under demand management, but the number of awards made to new investigators had not changed. Council also heard a report from the Chair of Science Board, who assured Council that Science Board had also tested the detail of the report and supported the proposals of the executive that the effects of demand management measures on new investigators should remain under review. Council noted the report and thanked the executive for a thorough review. Council agreed that the current demand management approach should continue, and that the same depth of reporting and review should remain in place to ensure that any adverse unintended consequences on new investigators would be detected in the future. It was also agreed that a detailed communication of the evidence of the review will be developed for circulation to research organisations.

Commissioning national capability services and facilities

Council reviewed the proposed strategic approach to commissioning services and facilities portfolio over the next five to ten years, including a consideration of the strategic need for, and evaluation of, each service and facility by a Panel chaired by a member of Science Board. Council noted that a more detailed proposal of which service and facility to commission under each strategic priority would be brought to the next meeting of Council.

Standing items

Council also noted a number of standing items including the rolling programme of business, and a report of the Science Board of 7-8 February, the Innovation Advisory Board of 9 February 2017, the Training Advisory Board of 1-2 December 2016 and the Audit and Risk Assurance Committee of 14 December 2016. Council also noted the Annual Report of ARAC, and thanked them for their valuable contribution over the past year.

Date and time of next meeting

The next NERC Council meeting will be held on 8 June 2017.