

NERC Council Meeting

Summary of discussions

27 September 2017
Environment Centre Wales, Bangor

Members present:

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

Apologies: Dr S Davies (IAB Chair), Professor G Orpen.

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

BEIS representative: Dr S Axford.

Other attendees: Professor A Hatton (SB Chair), Professor N Brown (TAB Chair, Items 11 and 14), Dr K Tearall (Head of Research Careers) (Item 11).

Secretary: Dr AJ Turner.

Key issues discussed

The NERC Chair, Sir Anthony Cleaver, welcomed members and thanked colleagues from Bangor University and the Centre for Ecology and Hydrology, both based in the Environment Centre Wales, for their hospitality and the introduction to the science led from the Centre. Sir Anthony also welcomed the announcement of Professor Duncan Wingham's appointment as the first Executive Chair for NERC as UKRI comes into being from April 2018.

Chief Executive update

Council heard an update on the establishment of UKRI including the work to put in place structures, processes and arrangements for UKRI, and to prepare advice for Ministers on future funding allocations. Professor Wingham noted the recent announcement of the appointment of a Chief Financial Officer for UKRI and the imminent announcement of the UKRI Board.

Council received an update on implications so far of the UK EU referendum result in relation to staff and student data - this shows little impact to date. The Chief Executive also briefed Council on the ongoing engagement with BEIS on the Industrial Strategy and planning for future waves of the associated challenge fund, including an expected focus on 'place'. Professor Wingham noted the announcement of the first Chair for the British Geological Survey, Sir Keith O'Nions, and gave an overview of ongoing work to ensure national capability continued to meet needs across the UK environmental science community.

Finance and risk report

Council received a finance report which set out a predicted balanced financial position for the current financial year to date. Council then turned to the risk report and received an update including on how health and safety and any associated risks would be effectively managed when NERC is part of UKRI structures.

Update from BEIS representative

Mr Axford gave Council an overview of progress in establishing UKRI from a BEIS perspective. He confirmed that the announcement of the UKRI board was likely to be imminent, and that there were ongoing discussions to set the relationship between this new body and BEIS as sponsor department. He also updated Council on the expected timelines for finalising future budget allocations for coming years, Industrial Strategy and reiterated how thematic considerations such as place and themes e.g. space were likely to be included within the white paper.

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 that ongoing talks to progress this activity with officials at BEIS continued to be collegiate, with a submission to the Minister expected.

Council thanked the GRO assurance committee for their ongoing support and assistance for this project and in informing work with BEIS officials. Reports will continue to be presented to future Council meetings as this programme of work progresses.

National Capability Commissioning: services & facilities commissioning implementation update

Professor Wheeler gave an overview of progress in implementing the commissioning of services & facilities, following a previous Council discussion and decision as to approach in March 2017. Professor Wheeler emphasised that engaging and communicating this change to the community had been a priority for NERC.

Council broadly supported the ongoing activity, including the evaluation to inform setting of future categories, and asked Professor Wheeler to ensure that the overarching strategic approach was threaded through the implementation, noting this context would be important to inform future rounds of commissioning, including any evaluation.

NERC resource budget allocations 2018/19 and 2019/20

Professor Wingham outlined to Council the process that had happened on a quick turnaround over the summer to share with UKRI and BEIS NERC cases to assist determine future budget allocations for resource for coming years. Professor Wingham used the papers to prompt a discussion with Council about what was needed to continue to sustain NERC as an effective funder and commissioner of environmental science within the new context of UKRI. Council welcomed the discussion and the initial ideas about future direction shared by Professor Wingham, and agreed it would be useful to have a dedicated slot on the

December agenda. This will allow Council to share its insights to inform this future direction for NERC, in the context of more information about UKRI context and what may be required from a future NERC Council.

UK Antarctic Hub – aircraft capability

Council welcomed a report of the progress and proposals for future aircraft capability for the Antarctic, noting considerable effort had gone into examining options for future air capability. Council approved the business case for the UK Antarctic Hub – aircraft capability.

Evaluation and Future Commissioning of Doctoral Training Partnerships (DTPs)

Professor Nigel Brown joined for this item. Both he and Professor Tim Wheeler gave an overview of the evaluation of current DTPs, noting that the current cohort of DTPs had, on the whole, performed well, with some notable areas of strength and some learning for the commissioning of future DTPs. Council agreed the approach to put out the next round of DTPs, and welcomed that the call will encourage the aspects of good practice identified from the evaluation to ensure these strengths both continued and embedded more broadly. Council also asked the NERC executive to ensure there were incentives for continued excellence by existing DTPs within the context of the competition. Council requested that the conclusions of the evaluation report of the DTPs be made available to any future review panel.

Standing items

Council also noted a number of standing items including the rolling programme of business, and reports of the Training Advisory Board meeting of 14 June, the Innovation Advisory Board meeting of 15 June 2017 and the Audit and Risk Assurance Committee of 6 June 2017, including the annual report and accounts.

Professor Hatton gave the report of the Science Board meeting of 12-13 July 2017, and Council indicated its support for the approach taken by Science Board to the proposals for future Strategic Programme Areas.

Date and time of next meeting

The next NERC Council meeting will be held on 13 December 2017.