

NERC Science Board Meeting

Summary of Discussion

7 & 8 February 2017, BEIS Conference Centre, London

Members Present: Professor Angela Hatton (Chair), Professor Mike Begon, Professor John Brodholt, Dr Jennifer Collier, Professor Peter Cox, Professor Lora Fleming, Professor Rosemary Hails, Professor Tamsin Mather, Professor Ian Poll, Professor Andrew Shepherd, Professor Rowan Sutton, Professor David Thomas, Professor David Vaughan, Professor Susan Waldron, Professor Mathew Williams.

Ex Officio: Professor Duncan Wingham, Professor Tim Wheeler.

Apologies: Professor Duncan Wingham (Day 1 only), Professor Mike Begon (Day 2 only).

Other Attendees: Dr Ned Garnett, Dr Caroline Culshaw, Dr Liz Fellman, Dr Nicki Badcock, Professor Ed Hill, Professor John Remedios, Professor Peter Jan van Leeuwen, Professor Paul Palmer, Professor Stephen Mobbs, Professor Alastair Lewis, Professor Mark Bailey, Professor Alan Jenkins, Professor John Ludden, Professor Mike Stephenson, Professor Richard Horne, Professor Lloyd Peck, Professor Steve Banwart, Professor Ian Bateman, Dr Andy Croxford, Professor Alexander Densmore, Dr Isabelle Durance, Professor Bridgett Emmett, Alyssa Gilbert, Professor Dickon Howell, Professor John Ludden, Dr Emily Shuckburgh, Professor Graham Underwood, Dr Avril Allman.

Secretary: Lyndsey Jones

Key issues discussed

NC Commissioning Single Centre Science and National and Public Good

Centre leadership teams presented their plans for National Capability (NC) Science and National and Public Good categories and discussed strategic direction, strengths and weaknesses of the plans with Science Board. The Board agreed the Centre leadership teams should return to the July Science Board meeting for a collective discussion around more detailed outlines. The Board discussed the next steps in the process; the proposed review process was broadly accepted and members agreed to establish a working group to consider the evaluation criteria in more detail.

CE Update

The Board heard about current progress of UKRI and the Industrial Strategy Challenge Fund and Professor Wingham drew attention to the open consultation on the Industrial Strategy. Members queried whether the effects of Brexit are being felt. Professor Wingham said that NERC is monitoring the situation and continuing to engage with Government on immigration issues that could negatively affect UK science.

Portfolio Analysis

Members of the Strategic Programme Advisory Group (SPAG) joined Science Board for this, and the following item. The two Boards discussed data regarding NERCs funding investment and how these related to the challenges outlined in the NERC strategy, and decided to form a joint subgroup to explore the data further and determine justification and potential mechanisms for a strategic steer.

Strategic Programme Areas

Science Board and SPAG discussed the latest ideas prioritised by SPAG through the ideas process. Science Board decided that two potential SPAs should be scoped; Enhancing the Resilience of UK Peatlands and Designing Future Landscapes for Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services. The assessment and recommendation to Council will be made at the July 2017 Science Board meeting.

Highlight Topics Competition

Science Board and the SPAG Chair discussed the data presented on the levels of competition in the highlight topics (HT) grant rounds relative to the funding model, and the relationship between idea submitters and investigators on proposals. The Board noted that competition within HTs was healthier when smaller grants were offered and felt that peer review should balance concerns that resources may be spread thinly between groups in large consortia. Science Board decided that both Boards should carefully consider the rationale for the HT funding models in the next round to achieve appropriate levels of competition.

Demand Management Outcomes

Science Board reviewed data on demand management outcomes and was reassured that the measures are reducing the volume of uncompetitive proposals received by NERC. The Board discussed the specific case of New Investigators and recommended that the eligibility criterion should be increased from three years to five years from becoming eligible to apply for NERC funding and that the Science Board/Training Advisory Board working group on early career researchers should consider the case of New Investigators and demand management further.

NC Services & Facilities Commissioning Update

The Board heard about the evaluation process for services and facilities and that it would receive a fuller update once Council had ratified the outcomes.

Standing items

The Board confirmed the minutes and noted the finance report and forward agenda.