NERC Science Committee 6th Meeting

Summary of Discussion

18 & 19 November 2020, via Teleconference

Members Present: Professor Graham Underwood (Chair), Dr Adrian Baker, Professor Lora Fleming, Dr Anna Jones, Professor Christine Maggs, Professor Tamsin Mather, Professor Richard Pancost, Professor Andrew Shepherd, Professor David Thomas, Professor Simon Vosper, Professor David Viner, Dr Doug Wilson.

Ex-Officio: Professor Susan Waldron (NERC Director, Research and Skills)

Apologies: Professor Alberto Naveira Garabato (whole meeting), Professor Sir Duncan Wingham (items 5 & 6 on the 18th November and 19th November).

Other Attendees: Whole meeting: Dr Sarah Turner (NERC Associate Director, Strategic Programme Delivery). 19th only: Dr Iain Williams (NERC Director, Strategic Partnerships). Item 5 Dr Robyn Thomas (NERC Associate Director). Item 7: Dr Sally Reid (NERC, Head of National Capability Policy), Sophie Hodgson (NERC Associate Director, National Capability). Dr Mike Webb (NERC Head of Marine), Dr Ruth Kelman (NERC Head of Resilient Environment), Dr Lizzie Garratt (NERC Head of Atmospheric & Polar) and Dr Bethany Adams (NERC Head of Productive Environment).

Secretary: Gemma Davies

Key issues discussed

Executive Chair update

The Committee heard about the spending review noting that government departments will be given their settlement on the 25th November. The on-going disruption to Large Research Infrastructures and facilities, resulting in delays to Marine and Antarctic programmes was noted. The large amount of funding that has been made available for grant extensions and to support PhD students was discussed, noting the challenge with a larger second phase of support for PhD students is that it would constrain capacity to invest in training PhD students in the future.

EDI: Sustainability of funding mechanisms

Science Committee discussed NERC’s approach to exploring its data to understand better if and where there may be inequalities in award processes, and offered feedback on the approach taken (considered robust) and made suggestions on how to proceed with more granular analysis.
Discovery Science: Reforming our business review/update

Science Committee commented on the overview of community response and engagement with the scheme and pilot, and discussed the suitability of the plan for pilot review and evaluation. It was noted the focus currently is on reviewing the process of the pilot and that an assessment of whether the science improved would take longer. However, an initial step in doing this would be to look at applications to see if the science proposed is more adventurous or exciting when compared to the standard grant round. The lower levels of bureaucracy were well received, and it was suggested to look at this process a year from now to see if there have been any unintended consequences.

Annual Review of activity 2019 to 2020, and alignment with Terms of Reference

Science Committee reviewed the Terms of Reference and identified areas for potential future papers for discussion with the Executive. Science Committee agreed that the Terms of Reference are still fit for purpose, and in reflecting on the functioning of the Committee agreed the practices and process of the meetings were working well.

National Capability Science – Mid-Term Review process for Single Centre Science

Science Committee discussed the outline proposals for NC Multi-Centre Science funding, both individually and as a collective portfolio and provided advice on the appropriateness of the scientific challenges detailed in the proposals. The potential for each outline proposal idea to deliver the Multi-Centre programme aims in the context of NERC’s Delivery Plan priorities was also discussed. Science Committee advised on the ‘exam questions’ that set out a framework for assessing whether the full proposals reflect NERC’s aims for investments in Round 2 of NC Multi-Centre Science.

Standing items

The Committee confirmed the minutes and noted information papers, Discipline Balance and Financial Forecasts, and the forward agenda.