

Evaluation of NERC's process for commissioning Research Programmes

Management Response

Background

1. NERC commissioned this evaluation in order to evaluate how well the commissioning process is enabling NERC to commission Research Programmes comprising the best research to meet its strategic aims.
2. This document provides the management response to the evaluation report from NERC's Director for Science Delivery (DSD), who is the customer for the evaluation. The evaluation report has been discussed by SISB and, alongside this management response, reported to Council.

MANAGEMENT RESPONSE

3. The evaluation report provides valuable evidence on the quality of the process for commissioning Research Programmes. This evidence is reinforced by NERC's Science & Innovation Strategy Board (SISB) discussions of the panel's findings. These discussions culminated in the Board being assured that the process is working well and has been improved based on lessons learned, and is generally flexibly delivering research well-designed to meet the intended goals.
4. I particularly welcome the observation that the process is sufficiently flexible to enable NERC to commission a diverse range of programmes that have fostered novel research and new interdisciplinary collaborations, while enabling us to secure a significant amount and range of partnerships and co-funding. I am reassured by the panel's observation that the programmes commissioned have been implemented as envisaged in theme action plans and as approved by Council — and that where deviations have occurred, this has generally been in co-funded programmes where the scope was expanded to include co-funders' interests.
5. The report raised a number of specific issues and concerns, and offers eight proposals for ways to strengthen the process. These proposals fall into three categories:
 - programme/commissioning process design,
 - partnerships, and
 - calling for and assessing proposals.

These proposals are considered in the action plan below alongside actions to address them.

6. In addition to supporting all eight proposals, SISB discussions emphasised four areas:
 - (i) The importance of increasing the external transparency of the processes;
 - (ii) The broader application of expression-of-interest and outline bid stages for building communities, collaborations and in demand management;
 - (iii) *Living With Environmental Change* has an especially important role to play in strengthening and streamlining partnerships and facilitating co-funding, co-design and co-delivery;
 - (iv) How to further strengthen engagement of user partners, through earlier involvement during the planning process with users to co-design research.

Action Plan

7. This section addresses the eight proposals made on page 2 of the evaluation report. The words in italics are taken from the report.

Programme and commissioning design issues

Proposal 1: NERC should consider ways in which the commissioning process could be streamlined, including:

- (a) continuing to encourage large research programmes (>£4m), supporting small programmes only in specific cases where they bring considerable benefits, e.g. address very specific research questions, foster capacity building; small programmes should be commissioned using a streamlined process; and*
- (b) taking steps to manage demand.*

Management response: proposal accepted

8. Steps have already been taken, where appropriate, to streamline and speed up the Theme Action Plan (TAP) process for the second and third cycle: the number of scoping studies has been reduced; advisory steps preceding calls have been reduced or delivered in parallel or eliminated; fast-track peer-review. Further pressure to streamline is exerted as a consequence of the required savings in the administration budget demanded by the Comprehensive Spending Review, but there is a balance to be struck in that some programmes will benefit significantly from capacity building or substantial partnership working, which generally require longer development times and high effort. In these cases, effort will be focused on critical partnerships, and with NERC’s highest priority impact areas. The proposal to commission fewer small programmes was also a recommendation of the Theme Leader mid-term evaluation. Progress has already been made in this area, and is being reinforced through proposals emerging from theme evaluations and agreed by SISB (and so influencing Theme Leader advice on future actions).
9. The recent NERC Demand Management project, which has focused on managing demand to responsive mode, has recommended focusing efforts on self-management by research organisations. This will have an effect on research programme submissions, but in addition NERC will increasingly use expressions of interest and outline bids to manage demand in research programmes (in addition to using them to build communities and collaborations), particularly if programmes are designed for delivery via larger projects/consortia which require significant effort to prepare and review or if the scope of opportunities is broad and a large applicant community exists (see proposal 7).

Action 1	Guidance to Theme Leaders to maximise TAP action size and minimise number of smaller actions (with smaller actions to be commissioned through simpler processes).
Responsibility	Director, Strategy & Partnerships to advise theme leaders, Head of Research for small action delivery.
Deliverables	Fewer small programmes in future TAPs.
Due	TAP4

Action 2	Introduce greater use of outline bids to manage demand where appropriate.
Responsibility	Head of Research

Deliverables	Fewer cases of low success rates at full proposal stage.
Due	Immediate

Proposal 2: To ensure that the optimal commissioning process is used in each case, it is essential that both Theme Leaders and key research community members are consulted early in the commissioning.

Management Response: proposal accepted

10. A similar issue was raised as part of the Theme Leader mid-term evaluation. NERC engages the community in a number of ways, ranging from public consultation on the strategy, through to community events to discuss draft TAPs, web consultations on individual research challenges, TL visits to institutions, and focused meetings on TAP actions. During the commissioning process, additional advice may be sought if it is deemed that the consultation leading up to Council's approval of the actions has provided insufficient focus to develop a robust science plan and/or call for proposals. The level of advice sought will depend on the complexity/size of the programme and degree of specificity available in the TAP. We welcome the panel's advice (paragraph 12 of report) to involve commissioning managers at an earlier stage in TAP development, and agree that this would help with the translation of TAPs to research programmes.

Action 3	Increase engagement between commissioning managers and Theme Leaders in both TAP development and RP commissioning
Responsibility	Director Strategy & Partnerships and Head Research.
Deliverables	More robust translation of TAPs into programmes.
Due	Immediate

Proposal 3: To increase the research community's confidence in the commissioning process, NERC should urgently implement steps to improve transparency of the process and its communications about the process

Management response: proposal accepted

11. This sort of communication has not been hitherto a priority and has consequently not been systematic, but it is now clear that there are considerable benefits to improved transparency and communication on commissioning processes, memberships of groups, document authorships etc., including the TAP process. The NERC website, including individual RP websites, will be improved and regularly updated to include this sort of information. The existence of this sort of information as a transparency measure will be actively communicated in the early months, and made more prominent in the higher levels of the NERC website.

Action 4	Increase transparency through providing more information on NERC website, signposted and explicitly communicated.
Responsibility	Portfolio Planning Manager & Commissioning Process Manager
Deliverables	Visible process information communicated and regularly updated on NERC website.
Due	Ongoing from summer 2011

Partnership issues

Proposal 4: NERC should work with its partners and LWEC to strengthen links, and to explore further ways of facilitating co-funding activities, and alleviating the tensions that can arise between NERC priorities and co-funders' needs.

Management response: proposal accepted.

12. As NERC has increased its partnership working in recent years, we have learned to better understand and tension the benefits and challenges to deliver NERC's research programmes. The vanguard learning through LWEC has been especially valuable, given the need to deliver impact, and that learning and improvement is still ongoing. The LWEC Directorate has recently established steering groups of partners clustered around strategic science objectives, and NERC will actively use these groups to further facilitate partnership working and seek streamlined ways of working that may then be transferred outside the LWEC domain. Memoranda of Understanding may be more useful with first-time partners.

Action 5	Use participation in LWEC challenge groups to explore improved modes of partnership working.
Responsibility	LWEC Theme Leader & Head of Research
Deliverables	More efficient and effective partnership working.
Due	Ongoing

Proposal 5: NERC should continue its policy of involving research users at an early stage in programme development. To maximize opportunities and impact, NERC should consider how knowledge exchange and impact could better be considered early in the design of programmes, including assigning programme funds for these activities.

Management response: proposal accepted

13. A similar recommendation was made as part of the Theme Leader mid-term evaluation. Steps have since been taken to improve the knowledge exchange and impact potential of TAPs through earlier engagement of the KE team with Theme Leaders as TAP actions are developed. The KE team will also work in partnership with the commissioning managers to help define the most critical KE requirements for programmes in the early stages of commissioning, particularly with regard to developing links with business.

Action 6	Theme Leaders, commissioning managers and NERC KE team to develop closer working practices early in TAP development
Responsibility	Director Strategy & Partnerships and Head Research
Deliverables	Stronger impact plans in TAP actions
Date	TAP4

Proposal call and assessment issues

Proposal 6: To ensure that the research community has sufficient time to prepare proposals, particularly for multidisciplinary and/or novel research, NERC should make every attempt to (a) assign the appropriate call duration and (b) alert relevant communities early.

Management Response: *proposal accepted*

14. Recognising the need to balance the competing drivers for call timetables (e.g. time for consortia or team formation and idea generation; meeting financial spend profiles; logistical constraints (such as ship or facility availability); staff resources; and external administrative constraints), NERC is moving in the direction proposed. I recognize that this is a significant concern for both the academic community and also potential partners, even more so for those who do not normally engage with NERC. NERC will increasingly provide earlier notice by issuing pre-call announcements for some programmes, and will communicate more widely the indicative timings for announcing calls for proposals (currently at <http://www.nerc.ac.uk/research/programmes/opportunities.asp>). Where appropriate, advisory inputs will be sought as part of setting call durations, tensioning the need for the commissioning process to deliver timely outputs with allowing sufficient time for developing collaborations and proposal preparation.

Action 7	Provide earlier, better communicated, notice of announcements of opportunity.
Responsibility	Commissioning Process Manager
Deliverables	Revised best practice guidelines, increased average notice of calls.
Date	Ongoing

Proposal 7: Announcements of Opportunity for broad topics with large research communities should call for Expressions of Interest, and state that EOIs may be sifted by peer review if required

Management response: *proposal accepted*

15. Expressions of interest (including ‘outline’ bids) are currently used for some research programme calls for purposes such as: to assess fit to programme, to provide useful pre-application planning information, to support collaboration or community-building via sharing of information; to reduce demand by not inviting full proposals. The decision to employ this stage balances the benefits against the costs, which include extending the length of the peer-review process and the resource requirements (both within NERC and the academic community) to assess them.

Action: See action 2 above.

Proposal 8: Sandpits should be used highly selectively where there is a clear need, e.g. bringing together diverse communities to address a highly novel question

Management response: *no action required*

16. Guidance is already provided to NERC’s commissioning managers on the use of sandpits. This guidance is consistent with the recommendation of the panel. No further action required.