

Evaluation of progress with delivering NERC's Sustainable Use of Natural Resources Theme

Management Response

Background

1. NERC Commissioned this evaluation in order to meet the need for evidence on progress with implementing the science themes set out in NERC's strategy.
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 the management response, reported to Council.

Management response

3. The evaluation report provides valuable evidence on progress with delivering the **Sustainable Use of Natural Resources (SUNR)** theme. This evidence is reinforced by NERC's Science & Innovation Strategy Board (SISB) discussions of the panel's findings, culminating in the Board being assured that good progress has been made in delivering the theme.
4. I am pleased that the panel felt that although the theme is a relatively new focus for NERC, it has already made encouraging progress. I welcome the panel's view that the theme actions are an excellent example of needs-led strategic investment, and are proving instrumental in helping steer NERC activities towards addressing the mitigation and adaptation responses to environmental change. I also welcome the Panel's observation that the theme is having beneficial influences on the academic and stakeholder community, changing attitudes and ways of working, and encouraging the interdisciplinary relationships that SUNR requires.
5. The report raised a number of specific issues and concerns and made proposals to tackle them. These proposals are considered, alongside actions to address them, in the action plan below.
6. SISB discussions emphasised two areas:
 - i. delivery of programmes requiring interdisciplinary approaches - such as the *Changing Water Cycle* programme - are vulnerable to loss of strategic focus from when the investment proposal is agreed by SISB through the call/funding/research process;
 - ii. understanding the relevance of current investments to the Theme - especially from Responsive Mode - should be strengthened.
7. On the first of these, the challenges of designing, funding and delivering interdisciplinary research are well understood, and the solutions largely known. In implementing these solutions, a key challenge is maintaining vigilance throughout the whole process. A NERC commissioning evaluation will shortly be undertaken, one of the principal focuses of which is to look at whether actions recommended by SISB and approved by Council are being funded and delivered as intended. Given the comments from the SUNR evaluation on delivering interdisciplinarity, the commissioning evaluation will examine the *Changing Water Cycle* programme. The overall evaluation will also address the issue of speed of research programme delivery, and the need to balance this with building of partnerships and capacity building.
8. The second of these SISB-emphasised areas is covered under proposal 3 in the Action Plan below.

Action Plan

9. This section addresses the six proposals made on pages 2-3 of the evaluation report. The words in italics are taken from the report.

Proposal 1: Challenge 2 (renewables): Although wind energy in the context of marine renewables has been identified as a priority area within this theme, it faces a significant funding-gap generally and NERC should consider ways to address this through strategy delivery processes.

10. This advice will be considered by the relevant Theme Leaders during the development of future TAP actions, and passed to Centre Directors for consideration during their planning processes. Both Theme Leaders and Centres will be asked to work together in identifying ways forward; both specifically on this issue, and more generally as part of broader work on optimising the contribution of national capability to strategic research.

Action 1	Action the Theme Leader and Centre Directors
Responsibility	Portfolio Planning manager
Deliverables	Consideration of the issue through future TAP development and Centre planning processes
Due	Immediate

Proposal 2: NERC needs to ensure that the best researchers are involved in SUNR investments, and must do more to encourage enthusiasm for interdisciplinary projects. For example, the context of programme announcements of opportunity should be made clear from the outset, and could be better presented and structured as science challenge-led. Moderating panels must work to clear guidelines to keep these objectives in focus, especially for interdisciplinary work.

11. Considerable experience has been gained within NERC in recent years on interdisciplinary capacity-building, assessment of interdisciplinary proposals and the management of interdisciplinary programmes through, for example, *Environment and Human Health, Rural Economy & Land Use, the Tyndall Centre and the UK Energy Research Centre*. This experience has been applied to SUNR programmes such as *Changing Water Cycle and Ecosystem Services & Poverty Alleviation*. The ongoing NERC commissioning evaluation will assess progress and success (see paragraph 7), and lessons learned will be documented and applied.

Action 2	Task commissioning evaluation to consider processes to drive interdisciplinarity.
Responsibility	NERC Evaluation Manager
Deliverables	Best practice revised and implemented
Due	Summer 2011

Proposal 3: NERC should consider developing a more effective system to inform TLs, and other interested parties, about investments relevant to the themes. NERC could, for example, consider including more RM grants in portfolio mapping, requesting RM applicants to map their proposals to the seven strategic themes.

12. Theme Leaders have currently incorporated larger non-TAP investments into their planning. This has included larger responsive-mode investments, and some of these have been explicitly involved in theme delivery. This process has captured circa £100M of responsive-mode

research mapped onto the NERC strategy themes and challenges. The broader question for NERC is how to capture the smaller responsive-mode investments efficiently, under future administrative funding constraints. Ways of achieving this will be explored.

Action 3	Review ways of expanding the scope of, but streamlining, the capture and provision of portfolio mapping information.
Responsibility	Portfolio Planning manager
Deliverables	More effective and timely mapping information for theme leaders
Due	Summer 2011

Proposal 4: NERC should continue to recognise, and plan for, the lead-time needed to develop interest and collaborations in new areas.

13. The NERC commissioning evaluation will address the balance of speed of research programme delivery with building of partnerships and capacity building. No new action required.

Proposal 5: To maximise opportunities and minimise duplication, NERC should ensure that concise summaries of the outcomes of pre-theme programmes are developed and made available to key stakeholders, particularly TLs. In future, syntheses of such programmes should be built into programmes' KE plans.

14. Research Programmes (in which knowledge exchange has typically been embedded in their design and implementation.) already produce annual reports, final reports, synthesised programme and project outputs for most end-of-programme events, along with press releases and other forms of publicity. All of these outputs are publically available. In future, this information will be more systematically passed to Theme Leaders and the NERC KE team they work with, to enable this proposal to be implemented.

Action 4	Systematicise the provision of summaries of outcomes of programmes to Theme Leader and KE team
Responsibility	RP process manager
Deliverables	Embedded process.
Date	Spring 2011

Proposal 6: NERC needs to ensure that the TL role remains manageable and attractive, to both the post-holders and their host institutions. In particular, it should be recognised that the TLs need considerable recognition and support for their active engagement with the academic and user communities.

15. This proposal is out of scope for this evaluation. A similar point was raised and addressed through the recent mid-term evaluation of the Theme Action Plan process, and will be considered as part of Council's future deliberations on the Theme Leader role. No action is required.

Director, Science Delivery